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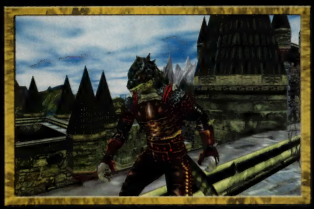

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CONTENTS

cgm • issue 135

34 COVER STORY

The New Masters of Magic

We take a hands-on looks at the next generation of magical fantasy strategy games, including Age of Wonders II, Heroes of Might and Magic IV, Age of Mythology, WarCraft III, Warlords Battlecry 2, and Warlords IV.

FEATURE

52 **Take Me There and Make Me a Part of It**
Part III: Foot-in-the-door skills for the games industry and beyond
BY KENN HOEKSTRA

NEWSWIRE

18 **Age of Cashing In**
South Korean wins $50,000 playing Age of Empires II
BY TRICIA GRAY

PREVIEWS

22 **Racing, Inc.**
Papyrus hits the track with NASCAR Racing 2002 Season. Also previewed: Mafia, Star Wars Starfighter, hands-on with Command & Conquer: Renegade, and more.

HARDWARE

56 **The Spice of Life**
Jason Cross wants developers to throw some randomness in the mix. Also this month: DOS Games, Meet Windows XP—Can DOS games endure in a Windows XP world?

REVIEWS

62 **Return to Castle Wolfenstein**
Get your own taste of World War II, comic book style. Also reviewed: Battle Realms, Ghost Recon, Wizardry 8, Europa Universalis II, Comanche 4, IL-2 Sturmovik, Star Wars Galactic Battlegrounds, and more.

AFTERLIFE

88 **The Fan is Dead**
Brett Todd celebrates fandom. Also covered this month: Marathon for Unreal, GMSimFinance for High Heat 2002, Startopia Post, and the world of Nox.

DEPARTMENTS

16 **Upfront**
Reviewing reviews of reviews—Filtering opinions and Balkanizing speech
BY STEVE BAUMAN

90 **Rebound**
Windows XP on the brain, plus comments about Tom Chick's brain. It's all good.

96 **Road to Nowhere**
The Really Little Guys—Capital vs. talent in independent game companies
BY CINDY YANS

98 **Inside the Sausage Factory**
Hand-off—Passing the Tropico torch
BY PHIL STEINMEYER

100 **Three Finger Salute**
Console envy—I'm *glad* I don't have one
BY TOM CHICK

NASCAR Racing 2002 Season

Papyrus is back with its latest stock car sim, and you won't believe your eyes. Also on the CD this month: Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon, Wizardry 8, Rogue Spear: Black Thorn, Sid Meier's Sim Golf, AquaNox, Etherlords, NHL 2002, and Zoo Tycoon.

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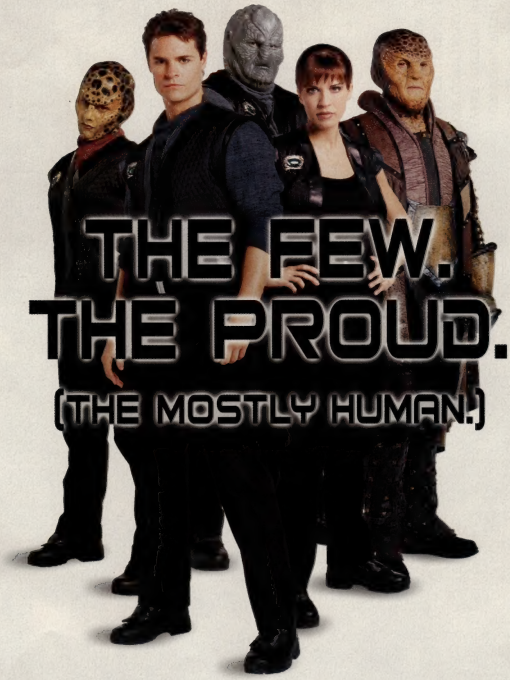

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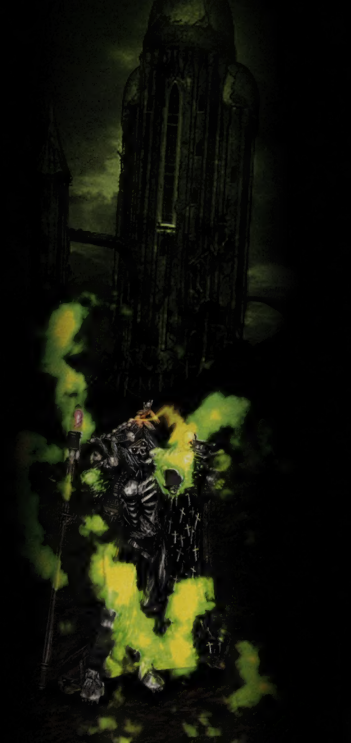

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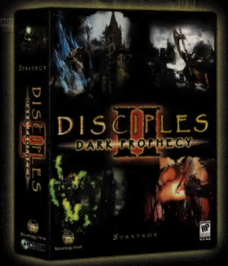

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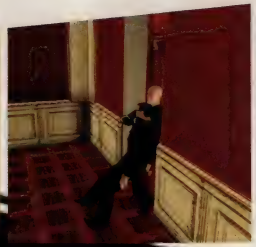

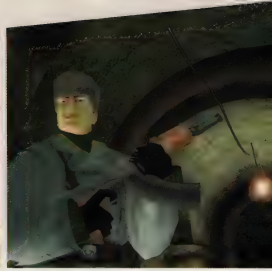

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upfront

reviewing reviews of reviews

Filtering opinions and Balkanizing speech

Reviews, reviews, reviews. There's been the usual flood of new releases this holiday season—some terrific, some less than terrific, some awful—that do a good job of showing that PC gaming isn't quite dead yet, it was merely taking a summer sabbatical. While the majority of the gaming world spends its time debating the merits of *Metal Gear Solid 2* versus *Grand Theft Auto 3* versus *Halo* versus *Dead or Alive 3* versus *Rogue Leader II* versus *Super Monkey Ball*, we're busy playing *Civilization III*, *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, *Ghost Recon*, *Dark Age of Camelot*, *Aliens Versus Predator 2*, *Ms. Pac-Man*... the list is virtually endless. Which single platform has the strongest lineup? I think it's pretty clear.

Now that the issues are full of reviews, we should start receiving more reader feedback, something that's been lacking for the last few months. Nothing gets readers more riled up than reviews—when you disagree, boy do you disagree. We literally lose readers over reviews.

That's an extreme reaction, but discussing games is similar to debating politics. As everyone is well aware, the United States is an intensely polarized country, and discussions of issues quickly tend to bog down in notions of what is ideologically pure, be it "left" or "right." Take any number of hot-button issues—from gun control and abortion to privacy and surveillance—and people are quickly drawn into opposing camps, each of which is characterized by rigidity (their own opinion is absolutely, intractably right) and hostility. Ultimately, rhetoric replaces reason, spin replaces sanity, and the actual discussion of the issue gets lost in all of the noise.

On the Internet, as in other aspects of life, people with particular interests tend to talk only with those who share their own values and beliefs. The Internet's ability to filter specific information may even go so far as to Balkanize speech and weaken democracy by eliminating all common ground, according to Cass Sunstein, a University of Chicago law professor who has written a book on this topic called republic.com. Sunstein maintains that exposing people to ideas they may not have chosen themselves protects against extremism. With filters in place, people may not have any idea of what they're not seeing, and they may miss ideas they may have never considered.

There are a lot of flaws in Sunstein's basic arguments—filtering has become a necessity due to the sheer quantity of information, polarization is as valid a choice as sitting in the middle, and his discussion of legislation that forces websites to provide alternate viewpoints is supremely ill-conceived—but it doesn't make his ideas less interesting, and relevant to gaming.

Discussions about games clearly aren't as important as those about legislation or social issues, but reactions to reviews tend to follow Sunstein's thinking. Based on feedback, many people only want to read reviews that perfectly match and validate their own tastes and choices; any opposing viewpoint, either positive or negative, is usually dismissed without proper discussion. Where this all comes to boil is with ratings. As a whole, people put too much credence in the star ratings, and I would suggest ignoring them, for the most part, and instead focus on the specific points made in the article itself. Remember that the definition for the rating, as it applies to that specific game, is found within the text, and that makes comparative analysis somewhat useless, as you're ignoring everything the text should, in theory, cover.

This shouldn't be read as a request to stop discussing reviews or submitting feedback. While we don't want to lose readers over reviews, we never want to discourage discussion. We've had people write in wondering if anyone agrees with our reviews because we tend to fill our letters section with comments from people that disagree, and that's intentional. It's only fair to present alternate viewpoints. Lord knows we're not interested in Balkanizing speech or trampling on democratic principles. That would be un-American.

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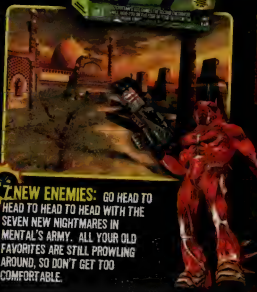

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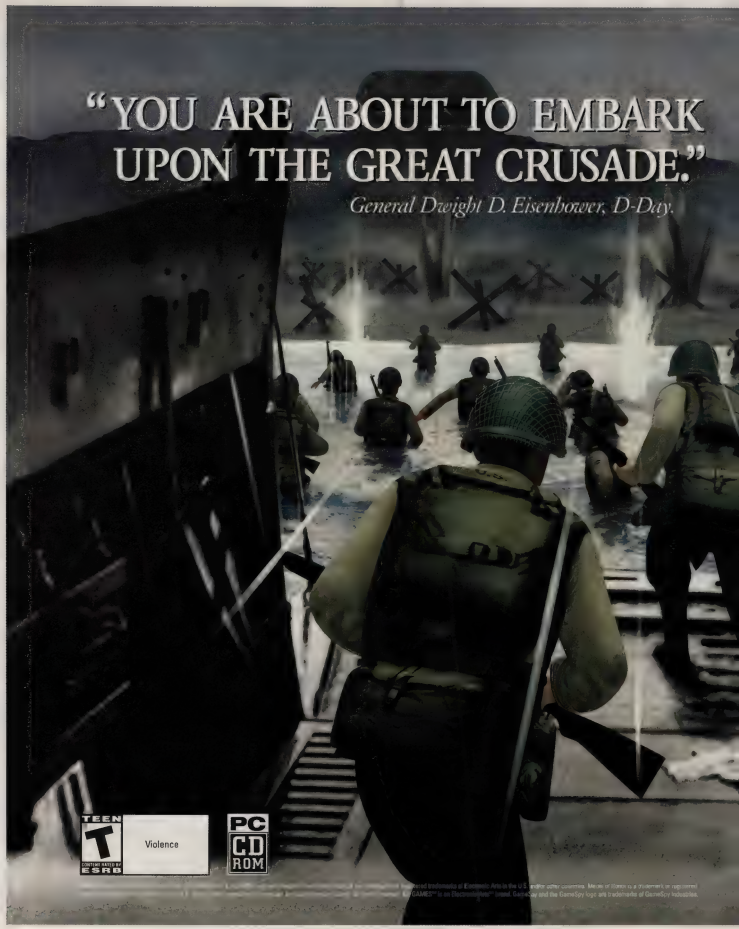
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Age of Cashing In

South Korean wins $50,000 playing Age of Empires II

by Tricia Gray

Sixteen gamers, each representing their home country, gathered at Microsoft's Redmond, WA campus on November 7, 2001 to meet their maker. Well, not their maker exactly, but the makers of their favorite game, *Ages of Empires II: The Conquerors*. The skilled sixteen battled other fans in their own countries, and then each other, to win this tournament set up by Microsoft. The Supreme Conqueror took home $50,000, second place $20,000, and the remaining $30,000 was divided among the rest of the region champions.

"I am just happy to be here and meet my opponents in person," laughs Christian "CID_REDSTAR" Gebhart, who represented Sweden. "Getting this far is worth it, we all get to visit America and all of us leave with some prize money."

"Seeing the sixteen champions together you really get a feel of the diversity this game gives," says Jerry "Gx_Iron" Terry of New Jersey. Not only is he the winner of the title "best player in the United States," but he is also a decathlete and works as a bartender. "I have a degree in Computer Science, so I hope being here will be a vehicle for me to get into the gaming industry," he says.

Australian champion Tanya "Lady Woogie" Crown, who used to play soccer for her country, focused before her round. " I am going to play my best, you can't really think too much on strategy at this point, you just play your heart out."

That's a really big check, and does Bill Gates really sign his name like a 12-year old?

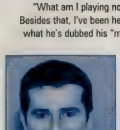
Every player agreed with Crown, just as everyone agreed that South Korean player, Byung Geon Kang, or as everyone knows him, CNS_Grunt, would take the title. Denmark's Magnus "H_Haslebo" Haslebo says he if he won the main prize purse he would use the money to get wasted and party, but he wasn't optimistic about his chances. "That South Korean player will probably beat me."

In the end, it was Alex "Kaohen" Wang from Taiwan up against Kang, with Kang bringing home the big prize. "In Korea, computer games are a big deal," the champion said shyly. "I am just grateful to come here and play." ●

WHAT ARE YOU PLAYING?

Bob McNamara
Breakaway Games

"What am I playing now? *Paradise Island* and more *Paradise Island*. Besides that, I've been helping my son turn his pile of go-kart parts into what he's dubbed his "mean machine". Hey, it runs-most of the time!"



Adel Chaveleh
TimeGate Studios

"I've actually been spending a lot of my time checking out all the demos for the games coming out this Christmas season. Other than that, I've been staying productive by playing *Kohan*, *Tropico* and *Commandos 2*."

Danny Bélanger
Strategy First

"I'm playing *EverQuest* a lot (yes too much...). Between my online gaming, I found a little time to play *Shogun Total War* and *Deus Ex*."

TOP SELLERS

1	DARK AGE OF CAMELOT Vivendi Universal Publishing Rating ★★★★ ½	
2	YURI'S REVENGE Westwood Studios Rating ★★★★	
3	THE SIMS Electronic Arts Rating ★★★★½	
4	CIVILIZATION III Infogrames Rating ★★★★★	
5	ROLLERCOASTER TYCOON Infogrames Rating ★★★★ ½	
6	DIABLO II EXPANSION SET: LORD OF DESTRUCTION Blizzard Rating ★★★★★	
7	OPERATION FLASHPOINT Codemasters Rating ★★★★ ½	
8	THE SIMS HOUSE PARTY Electronic Arts Rating ★★★★	
9	THE SIMS: LIVIN LARGE Electronic Arts Rating ★★★	
10	ASHERON'S CALL: DARK MAJESTY Microsoft Not Rated	

11. Sim City 3000 Unlimited; 12. Flight Simulator 2002 Pro; 13. Sim Theme Park; 14. Zoo Tycoon; 15. Stronghold; 16. Red Alert 2; 17. Max Payne; 18. Madden NFL 2002; 19. Diablo II; 20. Pool of Radiance: Ruins of Myth Drannor

Source: NPD INTELECT® Market Tracking. The October list is based on units sold by forty-two retail chains, representing more than 80% of the U.S. market.

SHAREWARE SPOTLIGHT

Orbiter
Martin Schweiger
[www.orbitersim.com]

For fans of hardcore realistic space flight, pickings have been slim since the 1994 release of Microsoft's *Space Simulator*. Enter Martin Schweiger's *Orbiter*, a free-ware program that puts you at the controls of a variety of theoretical spacecraft and gives you a solar system governed by realistic planetary motion and gravitational effects in which to fly them. Dock with orbital stations, land at planetary space-ports, take a trip to Saturn or maybe just a few spins around Earth. There are no missions and no AI, so the game is more about the journey than the destination. According to Schweiger, *Orbiter* is very much a work in progress, so watch for occasional updates. —*Benjamin E. Sones*

DEAD TREES

Doom: The Next Chapter
Author **Richard D. Clark**
Retail Price **Free Download**

One of the seminal 3D shooters, id's *Doom* helped create the basic framework for one of today's most popular PC game forms. Despite its undeniable appeal, though, the game didn't offer much more beyond blasting demons. Certainly neither the original nor its sequels had more than rudimentary plots and stories.

Ah, but never underestimate the power of a good imagination. Along comes Richard D. Clark with *Doom: The Next Chapter*, or *DTNC* as he calls it. It's a pen and paper role-playing game system based—you guessed it—on the storied shooter series. Much like Steve Jackson Games' *Frag*, which turned generic FPS games into turn-based tactical contests, Clark's free download (ftp://3darchives.in-span.net/pub/idgames/docs/misc/dtnc.zip) takes the frenzied action of a shooter and translates it into the more serene arena of dice, table tops and Cheetos. *DTNC* is complete with character classes, experience points, weapons, combat, and a much more fleshed-out backstory than you'll find in the actual *Doom* games, about on par with the various *Doom* novels.

The rule set looks pretty nicely fleshed out, and certainly appears viable if you're so inclined. You have to admit, the general idea of defending human civilization against an invasion of hellspawn does have a nice ring to it after all. Worth a look. —*Robert Mayer*

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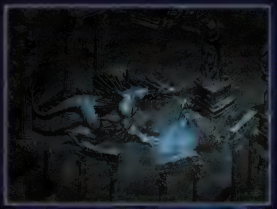

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Now might be a good time to be worried.

Racing, Inc.

Papyrus hits the track with NASCAR Racing 2002 Season

by Steve Bauman

To most gamers, racing simulations aren't as sexy and glamorous as first-person shooters, role-playing, or strategy games. But tucked away just outside of Boston in a nondescript building in Concord, Massachusetts is the office of Papyrus Racing Games, a company you could make a legitimate case for being the "id Software" of the genre. The company is devoted to producing racing simulations, something it's been doing as well or better than anyone else since the seminal *Indianapolis 500* of 1989. The company's latest release, *NASCAR Racing: 2002 Season*, is the latest version of the series previously known as *NASCAR Racing*. It's scheduled for release at the start of the NASCAR season in February.

The team is creating the game in an office littered with NASCAR memorabilia, actual race tires, steering wheel controllers, and large posters of past games (*IndyCar Racing*, *Grand Prix Legends*). These guys are serious about racing; the somewhat publicity-shy Papyrus physics mastermind David Kaemmer—the former Papyrus publicist mentioned he would turn down most press requests, saying, "Too busy, working on the game"—wears a Skip Barber racing jacket at lunch (most of the employees have done some "real" racing in one form or another). Art director Dave Flamburis watches the first day of qualifying for the NASCAR race at Homestead in his office while finding interesting replay angles for screenshots. And engineer Grant Reeve came from New Zealand to work at Papyrus after playing *Grand Prix Legends*—on his own time, he wrote a Direct3D wrapper for that formerly 3dfx-only game.

Tweaking the AI

"The core of our game is what it's like to get into one of these vehicles and drive it," says Tom Faiano, the producer of *2002 Season*, as he takes the new version of the game for a spin. The most obvious change is immediately apparent—while *NASCAR 4* looked pretty wonderful, this looks fantastic. It uses DirectX texture compression on cards that support it, which has allowed them to bump up the resolution of the textures used on cars, objects, and the environment. The car itself has gone from being a 256x512 texture to 512x512.

The AI, which was the recipient of much of the criticism directed at *NASCAR 4*, is also being tweaked. "[It's] one of the bigger disappointments for us, and something we really take to heart," says Faiano. "We spent a lot of time trying to improve it and fix the major bugs, and I think we've addressed most of them." But he realizes the AI is never going to be perfect. For example, most of the AI problems only occur on longer races, where you can see strange things on caution laps (swerving, immediate wrecks on green) and dodgy pit strategy. Faiano acknowledges these issues from past games, but says the behavior is much improved in *2002 Season*. There's also a lot of pit strategy (deciding fuel loads, whether to take on tires or not), and that's another area Papyrus wants to improve.

Ultimately, Faiano says the goal is the AI needs to be fun to race against and resemble what fans see on TV, which is side-by-side, competent racing.

More approachable

Papyrus is finally understanding that people want to have fun right out of the box, and is trying to appeal to the person who wants to play 5-10 minutes at a time as well as the per-

As the line gets orange, you want to start backing off the throttle.

son who's going to spend the next six months of his or her life wringing every ounce of enjoyment they can from it. "In the past there's definitely been a hurdle for more casual people getting more into the game," Faiano admits. "But you can still play it with balls-to-the-wall, ball-breaking realism."

For new players, there's now steering assistance if you select a digital controller (keyboard

or gamepad), though you'll still be better off in the long-run weaning yourself off of driver aids as soon as possible. There's also a new "best line" through turns, one that's color coded (like the one in *Gran Tourismo 3*) to represent when to get on or off the throttle and/or brake.

A new feature, the Highlight Theater, was designed primarily as an in-house tool for Papyrus to create tutorials for each track, but it's been integrated into the full game. Each tutorial is narrated by Darrell Waltrip, and will also include more general driving lessons, on generic racing issues like passing, drafting, and strategy. You can also edit your own replays, re-arranging the action, choosing camera angles, while adding sound files and your own artwork overlays with fades and other effects. "I think a handful of league administrators will use this tool," says Steve Myers, who's editing all of the tutorials. "They can put together a highlight reel of their two-hour race and turn it into a six-minute Sportscenter version."

In multiplayer, Faiano notes that a race game is particularly susceptible to grief players—it only takes a few seconds for a race to descend into complete chaos due to one or more drivers deciding they'd rather play destruction derby than race. The only administrator commands in *NASCAR 4* are based around player handles, which are easy enough to get around. In *2002 Season*, they're tied to a unique ID each player's game generates based on the original CD key. "As long as you continue to use that copy of the program, you can be banned," says Faiano, who hopes this tool will allow the community to police itself.

Another year, another NASCAR

By going with a new "season" identifier in the name, one that implies a new version every year, perhaps the expectations of users will be somewhat moderated. In most genres, a new sequel number denotes an all-new game with many new features—release the same game over and over again, and people will bitch and moan (this is known as the *Tomb Raider* effect). Sports games, with their yearly editions, promise incremental changes, and this is exactly what *2002 Season* is offering: a few new features, tweaks, improvements, but nothing radically different.

"Our main goal is to give people the new stuff as the season starts," says Faiano. "We're fortunate to have enough access to NASCAR so we can get new paint schemes in time to get them into the game and try to be as current as possible when we go gold." He says annual releases make it harder to add major new features, but they're maintaining the integrity of the product. "We're improving the learning curve and fixing some of the more glaring problems with the AI, and giving people the new stuff," he says. "We want people, the week of Daytona, to be able to go to the store and buy the game that's going to have all the new cars and paint schemes. All of these changes make it a better game." ●

Now who wants to go wash their clothes and eat some chocolate?

A full field gets ready to take the green flag.

Now that's racing... rubbing your neighbor.

Knock knock knockin' on Nod's door...

Relentless

Hands-on with Westwood's Renegade of a 3D shooter

by Robert Mayer

From the moment you hit the beach in search of your captured brethren, to the final confrontation with the minions of Nod, Westwood Studios' *Command & Conquer: Renegade* will have you going full bore. Enemies drop from helicopters, or appear behind you from alleys. Tanks and buggies blast at you from intersections, and guys with flamethrowers do their best to make you into a crispy critter. It's like you're smack in the middle of some demented *Command & Conquer* game, only you're the little guy being mouse-clicked around.

A Nod towards action

And that, it seems, is just how Westwood wants it. If the late beta version of the game is any indication, they might be on to something, too—it's frenetic at times, but it's also a pure action trip back to the days of *Doom*, only with superb 3D graphics, more plot, and much, much more stuff. It's also very true to the source material, down to the little health boxes that record damage to enemies, and the importance of tiberium to all concerned. It's all very much as if you become the Commando from the real-time strategy game, and have to fight it out as if you're in the middle of a real-time strategy game, rather than in any real-world special operation.

The game's single-player levels cover a broad range of game situations, from outdoor firefights to room-by-room slugfests. You have to rescue people, blow things up, capture things, and generally raise havoc with Nod, all the while trying to avoid the not so tender ministrations of a horde of bad guys, all drawn straight from the *Command & Conquer* unit list. You also get, at various points, help of a sort from sympathetic civilians and other GDI team members, all of whom carry grossly oversized but somehow compelling weapons of all sorts. You can even hop into some vehicles and go tearing around the map in a *Halo*-esque manner, which is always fun.

The game's look is very clean, though somewhat Spartan in places, not surprising given the science-fiction-y setting. There is a good amount of object detail, though, and the levels are generally quite large. They're also filled with nice touches, like a rack of armor suits hanging on a wall that, when you first burst into the room, are likely to cause you to unload a full magazine into them because they resemble Nod troopers so closely. You also get the full panoply of flashing lights and whirring machinery, including spinning parts

Driving vehicles is a trip.

The bad guys join the battle in very interesting ways.

that will rotate and flip you if you get to close. All in all, the game offers a rather convincing interpretation of a *Command & Conquer* world.

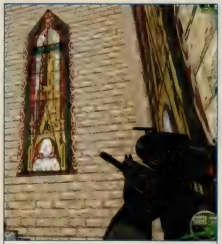
The hills have... chainguns

One way *Renegade* keeps you on your toes is by not skimping on the bad guys. Round a corner and you're thrust into a huge firefight with Nod troopers in the corners, on balconies, up on ledges. You can take a lot of damage, and so can they, so battles wind up being both intense and protracted, though close range action with flamethrowers, or getting tapped by a rocket launcher will still ruin your day. If you think you're safe, you probably aren't. The game likes to spawn enemies in nooks and crannies you've already "cleared," once you hit certain points on the map. It's a risky device in a real-world game, but here it works a lot better, particularly as

face they still look good, evidence of some nice level of detail work in the game engine. The health dots, little colored squares that appear under enemies when you target them, are a nice touch. As you pour lead into the baddies,

the bad guys tend to arrive by helicopter. It's strangely satisfying to gun them down as they dangle from their rope ladders, too.

The same applies indoors as magic well, where you'll clear a room on your way to an objective, only to find it crawling with Black Hand troopers on your way out. Nothing new here, as pretty much every indoor shooter has used the same trick, but it works better in *Renegade* than in most other games because the combat is so constant and your hide is so tough that you really don't notice the cheese factor. The enemies look so good that seeing more of them is hardly a burden. Even the run of the mill grunts look great, and when you get in their



[clockwise from top] Hy, what a big gun you have, little girl. >>> This waif has brought her advanced weaponry to church. How cute! >>> Not sure just what religion this church venerates, but it has nice windows. >>> Oops.

their health bar decreases, giving you some visual feedback as to their state of health.

Breaking from the pack

With its focus on fast-paced action and excellent but very bright looks, *Renegade* is breaking a bit from the current mold of ever-darker and more complex shooters. There's plenty to do in the game—every level is tightly tied to a series of mission goals, and some of them are pretty elaborate—but the heart of the game is pure action. It falls just short of offering *Serious Sam*-level carnage, but it's far more twitchy than, say, *No One Lives Forever* or even *Undying*. Fans of shooters will want to give it a whirl, and of course, fans of *Command & Conquer* will just have to see what an Ion Cannon strike looks like from ground zero. ●

Going Bonnano

Crime does pay (in 3D) in Mafia: City of Lost Heaven

by Tricia Gray

Though a handful of games have tried, few have successfully captured the feel of 1930s gangster movies. Illusion Softworks is trying to tie together the 1930s mob and immersive story-driven gameplay with *Mafia: City of Lost Heaven*, inspired by movies like *The Godfather* and *Angels with Dirty Faces*. The game will focus on typical events in the lives of gangsters, emphasizing their philosophy and way of life.

There will be 20 missions, each with a series of sub-tasks to complete, and each beginning and ending with a cinematic sequence. The story revolves around Tommy, a cab driver who manages to save some Mafia family members after an unsuccessful hit by a rival family. They offer him a job as a driver for their boss, Don Salieri. He takes the job, which makes him as well a rival to the Morello Family. At first, he likes his job, as some of the missions just involve him delivering messages or bootlegging merchandise from Canada, but after a while, he becomes a hit man. At this point he realizes he needs to find a way out.

The city of Lost Heaven is a generic, 12 square mile metropolitan area. As a cab driver, you get familiar with the local slums, ritzy localities, industrial districts, and also some specific locations such as Chinatown. Driving around the city, you notice that the cars and pedestrians react to the way you handle your cab. The laws of traffic also apply, so be cautious of lights and stop signs. Driving is a big part of this third-person game, and once in the mob, you will have a greater selection of cars to drive. The game even boasts an encyclopedia that gives overviews of 60 vintage vehicles. The driving physics are comparable to a decent racing game's, including damage modeling, so watch out for the ever-burdensome flat tire.

The attention to detail in the environments is impressive.

Don't make me smash your face in with this bat!

Screw the laws of driving. I'll go where I want! >>> Let me ask you something serious: can you fix my Victrola?

Illusion researched everything from the architecture to the fabric swatches that were trendy during the 1930s. In an early version of the game, we saw a level in which Tommy's mission is to take out one of Morello's goons. As you enter the hotel where he is eating dinner, the wallpaper and chairs scream art deco, there's a huge crystal chandelier in the foyer, and there are bellhops running around.

Because it is a living-breathing city, there are citizens strutting around in their zoot suites and molls window-shopping with clutch purses. Even though the environment is open, you can't really converse with all of the citizens, only the ones that are involved with the mission. Illusion felt that allowing you to do this would take too much time, and would pull you too far away from the linear storyline.

There will be a multiplayer component, and although it was not available in the demo, they do plan on including seven modes ranging from deathmatch to capture the flag, as well as a racing mode.

As it nears completion, *Mafia* shows promise in reflecting the rich world of mobsters without confusing storylines or gameplay. Unfortunately, you'll have to wait until early 2002 to pull on your brass knuckles and knock the wind out of any rat that tries to shake your clams. ●

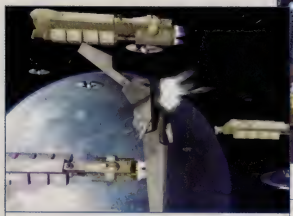
IT'S NOT JUST MEDIEVAL...

Space Port

A year later, Star Wars Starfighter leaps from PS2 to PC

by Jason Cross

A variety of missions, like this nighttime bombing raid, ensures that no level is quite like the last.



It just wouldn't be a Star Wars sim without enormous space battles.

Over the years, *Star Wars* space sims have been something of a staple on the PC. With *Episode I* released back in May of 1999, it's a wonder that PC joystick jockeys haven't had their chance to fly the ships from that movie yet. *Star Wars Starfighter* lit up the PS2 nearly a year ago as one of the console's earliest titles, and was regarded as a breath of fresh air after a disappointing launch lineup. Originally developed in-house by LucasArts, Secret Level is hard at work converting the title to the PC and Xbox.

Starfighter takes place during the events of *The Phantom Menace*, with three pilots joining forces against the Trade Federation. You begin the game as Rhys Dallows, a Naboo pilot-in-training, but soon meet up with the mercenary Vana Sage and space pirate Nym. You'll alternately control each of these characters, and their crafts' capabilities vary widely. Gameplay falls somewhere between the arcade-style blasting of *Rogue Squadron* and the simulation of the *X-Wing* series. You don't fly primarily in third-person view with a ship that automatically levels itself, but you won't have to worry about adjusting your energy balance between front and rear deflector shields, either.

Improvements over the PS2 version are mostly in the graphics department. Some ships have more polygons, but virtually all the textures have been replaced with higher-resolution versions. Add the ability to play at higher resolutions and (if you have the machine for it) faster frame rates than last year's console version, and you'll see a marked visual improvement. *Starfighter* features many scenes with large distant battles, and these simply look a lot better on a sharp monitor than a low-res TV.

The overall mission structure from the PS2 remains completely intact. You'll progress through a linear series of levels, separated by cut-scenes to further the story. The 14 levels are divided pretty evenly between outer-space battles and fights over planetary surfaces. Perform well enough on them, and you'll earn medals and unlock a few secrets.

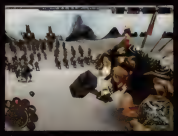
Unfortunately, when it's over, it's over, and one of the biggest criticisms of the Playstation2 version was that a serious player could complete the entire story in one full day. Multiplayer is exclusive to the Xbox version, a revelation that is sure to disappoint PC gamers. That means longevity will have to come from replaying missions in an attempt to pick up medals and playing the resulting bonus missions. Still, the light sim style of play should simply come across better with an honest-to-goodness joystick than with a console controller. In fact, *Starfighter* developers at LucasArts used joysticks while working on the PS2 version on their PCs, and had to be forced to switch to game pads.

Distant terrain looks even better at high-res.

Star Wars Starfighter was very well received on the Playstation2, and looks every bit as slick and approachable as a PC game. But PC players have different expectations of both space sims and *Star Wars* games, and might scoff at the lack of multiplayer. Will a relatively straightforward port of a console sim fly with the *X-Wing* crowd? We'll find out when *Starfighter* ships at the end of January. ●

Warrior Kings

IT'S FULL EVIL!



Warrior Kings is the ultimate in the evolution of real-time strategy games: lay siege to your opponent's castle, with siege towers, battering rams, fire arrows. Use your spies to open the gate and invade his city! Create and train your own army, oversee your economy, control the Church, conduct espionage, make war – in short, **rule**!

T
TEEN
ESRB

Blood
Violence

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Revenge is Sweet

Lord Blackthorn's Revenge gives Ultima Online new bite

by Robert Mayer

You too can own this nifty dragon. Maybe he'll eat your Final Fantasy action figures.

Origin's Ultima Online may be the oldest of the "big three" (um, make that four, now, with Dark Age of Camelot) massively multiplayer role-playing games, but for a while now it hasn't been the most popular, or the most celebrated. Don't count Electronic Arts out yet, though. In February they will be rolling out Lord Blackthorn's Revenge, the latest expansion for the venerable online game and perhaps the most intriguing.

The Chaos Demon being chaotic.

With some 30 new creatures, including a Chaos Demon and The Ancient Wyrm dragon, designed by noted illustrator and action-figure designer Todd McFarlane, the add-on should add some much-needed visual pizzazz to the game. As McFarlane himself noted in a prepared statement, "The UO community has come to expect great things from this evolving online world and there is no doubt that these new characters will significantly enhance the game while delivering a whole new level of excitement." The setting has Blackthorn, once a proud leader in Britannia but now a twisted menace, "half human and all evil," conniving to take control of the land (possibly by forcing everyone to play unpatched versions of Ultima IX).

With a design intended to lure in the new and succor the old players, and an expanded region of Ilshenar where players with the 3D and the older 2D clients can explore together, Blackthorn's Revenge is carrying the Ultima banner forward into the new year. Naturally, six McFarlane designed action figures and a couple of comic books will accompany the add-on's release. Electronic Arts is promising more "strategic" monster AI and a more dynamic game world where your actions will help move the overall story along as well as gain you loot. Don't count the Ultima line out yet. ●

The Ancient Wyrm as seen by the artist as a young tank mage.

Assassinate This

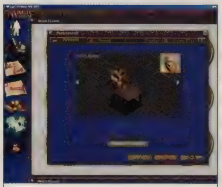
The bald killer returns to in Hitman 2: Silent Assassin

by Robert Mayer

Two locations from Europe, namely St. Petersburg [above and below] and Sicily [right].

Hitman 2: Silent Assassin is slated to arrive in spring of 2002, and Eidos hopes it will be more on target than the original. The sequel to *Hitman: Codename 47* again puts you in the role of a professional assassin, and you have to carry out "hits" in a 3D environment. This time around, though, you should find the going a bit less frustrating and a lot prettier.

The new game will allow a choice of first or third person viewpoint. Also on tap are mid-mission saves, a feature that will go a long way towards



Account information on the server will prevent cheating. >>>This is the main menu listing all of the available venues. >>>The preference room. You too can be a Cyclo

mitigating the frustration gamers often felt with the original's unforgiving nature. There will also be a new inventory and item system allowing you to accumulate weapons and gear over the course of several missions. No more shopping sprees before each hit, as the weapons you find during missions will stay with you, and you'll be able to loot weapons from bodies.

In keeping with the general desire for more variety, the new game will support different gameplay styles, with success possible through precision or sheer firepower, depending on your tastes and skills. For the less bloodthirsty, you'll be able to acquire non-lethal weapons as well. You can count on a "ripped from today's headlines" story involving Russian crime bosses and ex-Spetznaz assassins, and the usual graphics upgrades as well. ●

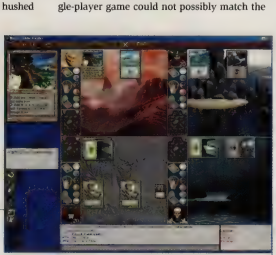
Back in the Hands of Wizards

Magic: The Gathering goes online

by Cindy Yans

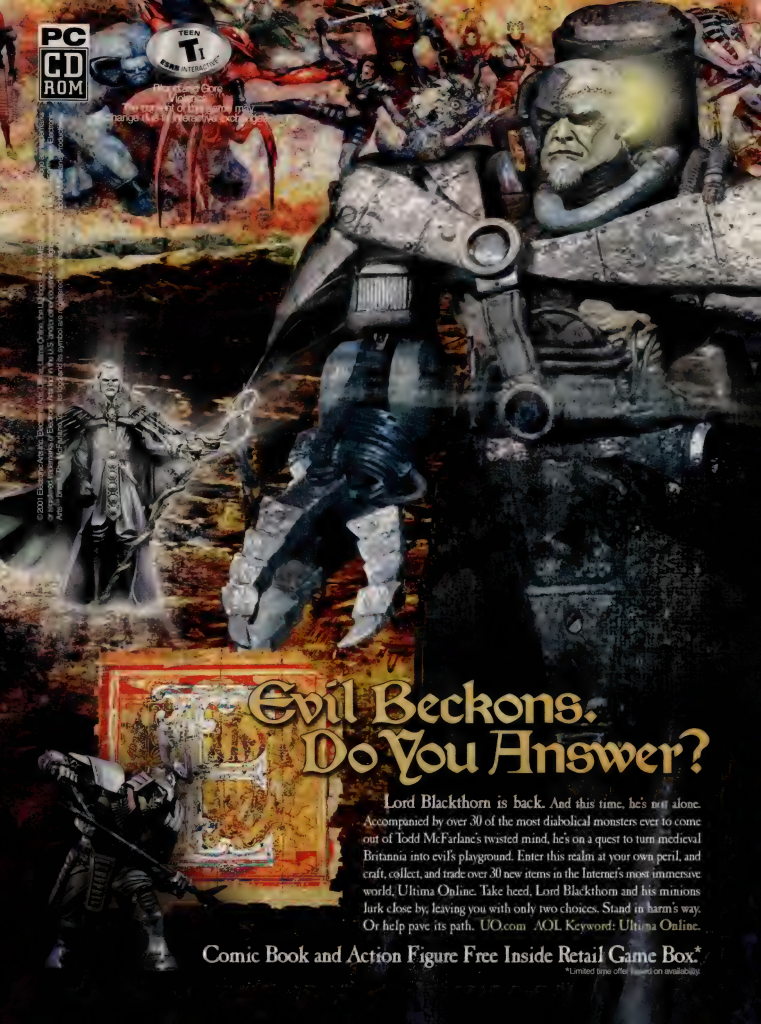
A few years ago, players of the collectible card game *Magic: The Gathering* waited with hushed anticipation as not one, but two versions of the game were in development for the PC. Acclaim's *Magic The Gathering: Battlemage* was a horror show, with real-time action that required you to be able to recognize every card at a glance by its symbol. Widely panned, it slunk quietly away. MicroProse's *Magic* game fared a bit better. Although it shipped with more bugs than an entomologist's lab, it was soon patched, and most agreed that it offered a reputable representation of everybody's favorite (at the time) trading game. However, Wizards of the Coast, progenitor of all things *Magic*, was not terribly pleased with the results from these two licensees.

Due to the large variety of decks, most players agree that the AI of a single-player game could not possibly match the experience of playing with real people. With that in mind, Wizards has tasked Leaping Lizard Software with creating an online environment for the title. In *Magic The Gathering Online*, you'll be able to purchase and trade digital cards, build and customize your decks, and organize your overall collection. Rooms of many different calibers will allow you to just the right venue, from casual pick-up games to highly competitive tournaments. Newbies will be able to observe games in the "Casual Play" room, and built-in tutorials and practice rooms will help ease the new player into the game world quickly.



This is the main battle screen where card is king.

Wizards of the Coast plans to release the *Magic Online* in spring 2002, and will simultaneously begin hosting official leagues and tournaments. ●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Evil Beckons.
Do You Answer?
Lord Blackthorn is back. And this time, he's not alone. Accompanied by over 30 of the most diabolical monsters ever to come out of Todd McFarlane's twisted mind, he's on a quest to turn medieval Britannia into evil's playground. Enter this realm at your own peril, and craft, collect, and trade over 30 new items in the Internet's most immersive world, Ultima Online. Take heed, Lord Blackthorn and his minions lurk close by, leaving you with only two choices. Stand in harm's way. Or help pave its path. UO.com AOL Keyword: Ultima Online.
Comic Book and Action Figure Free Inside Retail Game Box.*
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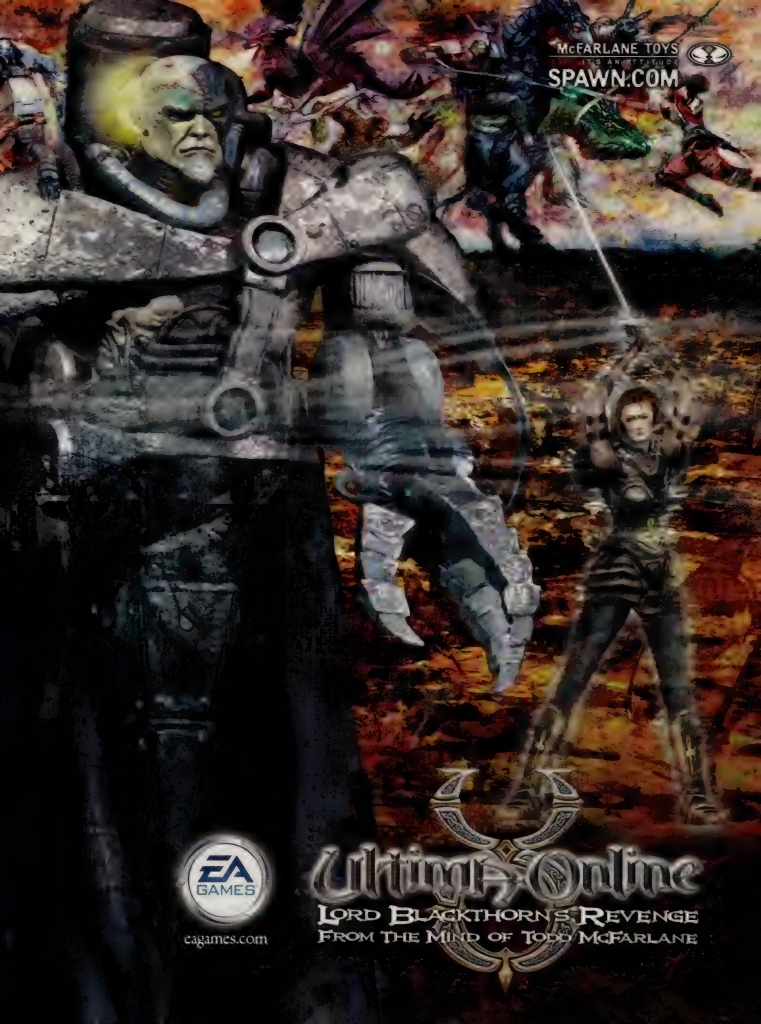
McFARLANE TOYS
SPAWN.COM
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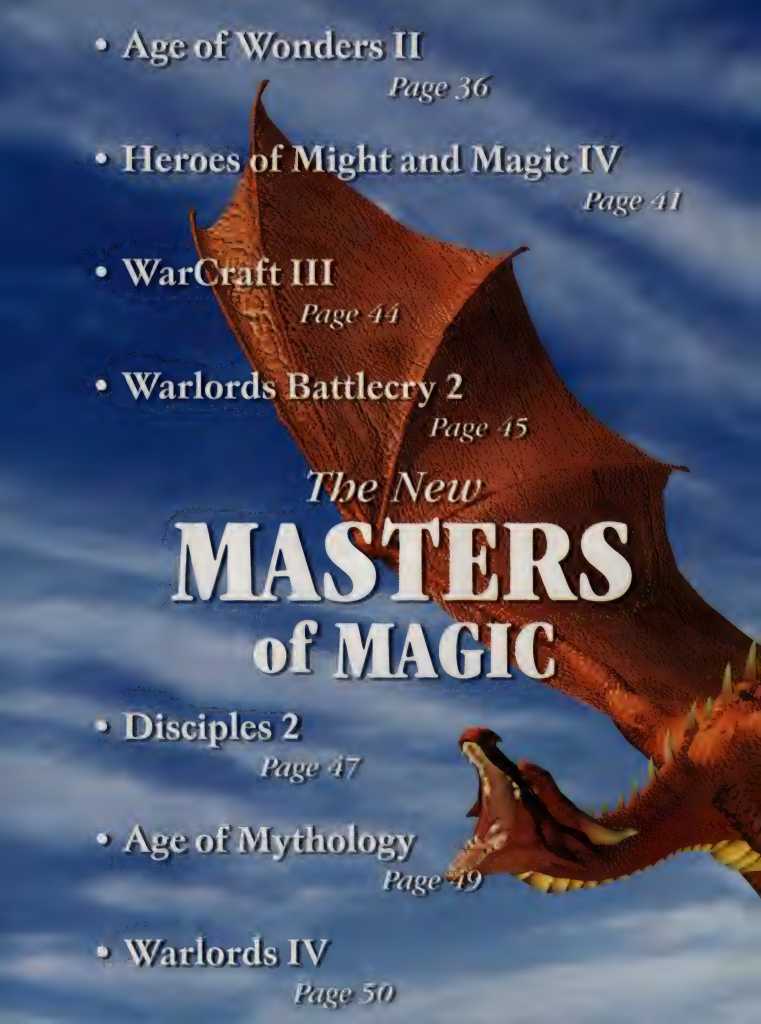
Ultima Online
LORD BLACKTHORN'S REVENGE
FROM THE MIND OF TODD McFARLANE



- Age of Wonders II
  Page 36
- Heroes of Might and Magic IV
  Page 41
- WarCraft III
  Page 44
- Warlords Battlecry 2
  Page 45

The New

MASTERS of MAGIC

- Disciples 2
  Page 47
- Age of Mythology
  Page 49
- Warlords IV
  Page 50

Imagine a world where there are no interspecies conflicts. A world where all the races are essentially identical. Where there are no arguments or protests. Where lawyers have no fur or tails at all. The dramatic conflict upon which we might base a strategy game, has no context, no meaning in a world like this. Add power... empire... tribe... war... and watch the framework begin to take shape. Now you have the milieu for strategic gameplay. However, there is nothing other-worldly for you to visit, and certainly no teleport pads to take you there. But add magic—in any form—*now* you have the basis for fantasy.

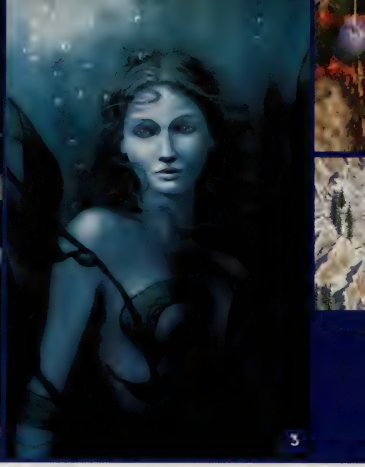
And what is magic?

Magic (mā' jik) 1. The art that purports to control & forecast natural events, effects, or forces by invoking the supernatural. 2 the art that purports to produce supernatural effects, as with charms, spells, etc

That there is some order to the universe is a central theme of fantasy. The warping of that order is what we see in Science-fiction, Cyberpunk, Fantasy and Epic Fantasy. Beyond Cyberpunk, which challenges our viewpoint with a depressing view of society and the future, and Science-fiction, with its very broad themes spanning the middle ground with a wide range, we have Fantasy and Epic Fantasy that traditionally deal with the conflicts of good and evil in fairly clear terms—usually with heroes of some kind with whom we can identify.

The upcoming games presented here in a tribute to the Fantasy Strategy genre vary widely in scope, setting, and history. In fact, the creators of *Age of Mythology* may very well balk at its categorization as a fantasy game at all. Its civilizations believed their deities to be quite real, after all, but it remains allegorical, providing a basis for the spirituality of the time.

Following in the tracks left by games like *Warlords*, *Sword of Aragon*, *King's Bounty*, *Heroes of Might and Magic*, *Fantasy General*, *Age of Wonders*, and yes, *Master of Magic* (the seminal title to which many people are still hoping for a sequel), here are the new faces of fantasy, each with their own mysterious quality of enchantment.



AND NOW FOR SOME PRESTIDIGITATION

Triumph Studios transforms a former college project into Age of Wonders II

by Benjamin E. Sones

Lennart Sas never meant to get into the game industry. That's not uncommon, but most people that never meant to get into the game industry don't have one successfully published game and a second in the works. Sas does. He seems okay with it.

The first game he worked on was *Age of Wonders*, a spare-time project that broke out of its cage and mutated into one of the best strategy games of 1999. He started the project in college with four friends, Eelco van der Snoek, Michiel van den Bos, Albert Louw, and Arno van Wingerden. Back then they were calling the game *World of Wonders*. Once it started to come together, one of Sas's friends—Arjan Brussee, a programmer for *Jazz Jackrabbit*—suggested the team show the project to Epic Games. Epic liked what it saw, and offered to publish it. "We really hoped to continue to work on games," says Sas, "but we wanted to get our degrees first. After we graduated, we went to work on the game full time, along with more experience and people we met through Epic. The original *World of Wonders* was shelved as a prototype and we wrote the new *Age of Wonders* from scratch, in about two years."

A lot has changed since then. Sas and van Wingerden went on to found their own development house in the Netherlands, Triumph Studios. Their publishing torch got passed from Epic to Gathering of Developers, which was then absorbed by Take Two Interactive. Most importantly, they started work on a sequel—*Age of Wonders II: The Wizard's Throne*.

TINKERING WITH SUCCESS

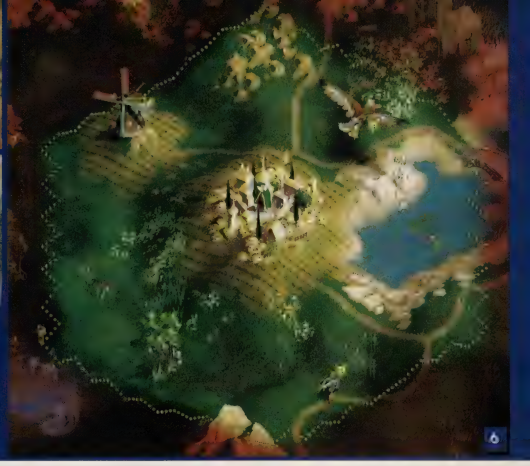
How do they plan to improve upon their success? Polish, polish, polish. Many of the new features came about in response to lessons learned from the first game, but that's not to say that the folks at Triumph are above tinkering with the original formula.

They have a good recipe to work with. *Age of Wonders* was a fantasy wargame with role-playing elements—*Warlords* meets *Heroes of Might and Magic*, if you like. The scenario maps were all hand made and featured the sort of fine detail that makes uncovering the map half the fun. The basic mechanics were fairly simple. You explore, capture cities, upgrade them so that they produce better units, then crank out armies and roll over the opposition. Battles took place on their own special battle maps, with different terrain to reflect your position on the world map. Any stacks of units adjacent to the fighting stacks would also be pulled into the battle, adding some strategic spice to troop movement and making for some really large endgame battles.

All of the good bits are in the sequel, of course, but Sas and company have spent a lot of time rethinking all the game's various elements and how they work as a whole. Some features are getting scaled up, others scaled back. A few are completely new. The result, Sas hopes, is a game that feels like the original but plays much better.

THAT OLD BLACK MAGIC

The story in the solo game is set just after the end of *Age of Wonders*. You play Merlin, a fledgling wizard fleeing the destruction of the last human strongholds after the battle in the Valley of Wonders. Along the way you meet up with Gabriel, the leader of an ancient circle of wizards from a faraway land called Evermore. Gabriel has a problem—his wizard flunkies have turned against



[1] The new diplomacy interface: she does n't look particularly nice. >>> [2] The solo campaign will teach you to use each of the spheres of magic: Life, Death, Air, Water, Earth, Fire, and Cosmos. >>> [3] Much of the game's 2D art is created by its designer, Lennart Sas. >>> [4] Zoom out your view to get a strategic overview. >>> [5] Forget Raymond; everybody loves mammoths! >>> [6] Your magical domain, illustrated by the dotted line, will dictate your strategy.

each other and abandoned their posts at the Circle of Evermoor, and he wants you to help sort the situation out. He offers to instruct you in the use of each of the spheres of magic—Air, Earth, Fire, Water, Life, Death, and Cosmos. You aren't one to look a gift horse in the mouth.

The story sets the stage for the solo campaign, which pits you against a series of three-scenario "episodes," each based on one of the spheres of magic. You have to play at least two of the scenarios in each episode in order to unlock the next episode; the third is optional, an opportunity to learn new spells and beef up Merlin if you are having trouble beating one of the required scenarios. You can also opt to research new combat skills in the same way that you research spells—another tough decision that you will have to contend with. "It's a tradeoff between learning new magic and improving your fighting abilities," says Sas.

Since each episode focuses on a different sphere of magic, your magical research resets when you move on to the next episode. Spells that you have learned do carry over from scenario to scenario within an episode, however. The last episode in the game features the Cosmos sphere, which includes all the spells from all the spheres of magic. That's your final test.

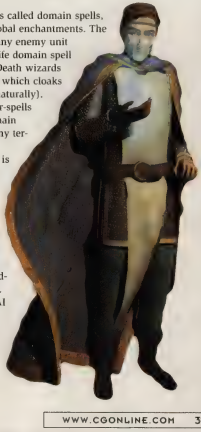
The Cosmos sphere will also be available in standalone scenarios and multiplayer games, but Sas contends that it won't unbalance the game. "The downside to the Cosmos sphere is that it takes longer to get the very powerful spells," he explains, "but you are broader." A Cosmos wizard can research all the same spells that a Fire wizard can, for instance, but the more specialized Fire wizard will get to the higher level spells earlier in the game.

Unlike the original game, your heroes (aside from your main character, Merlin) won't carry over between scenarios at all. "A lot of people just kept playing the scenario even after they won to beef up their heroes," says Sas. "Found an independent town, raze the town again, and research all the magic. We had to get around that."

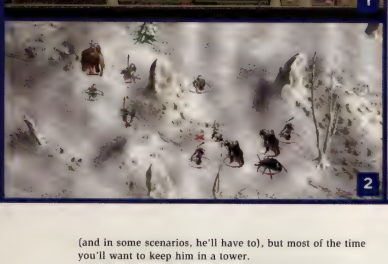
DOMAIN GAME

Magical domains are one of the most interesting new twists that the folks at Triumph have added to the game. Your wizard (Merlin, in the solo campaign) can only cast spells within a certain radius on the main map. If a unit gets into combat within your magical domain, you cast spells to help them out. If they are outside your domain, they have to fend for themselves. Domains also limit where you can cast the powerful global spells. Want to raise oceans, lower mountains, and turn rivers into ribbons of ice? You can... but only within your domain.

There is also a new category of spells called domain spells, which are even more powerful than global enchantments. The Fire domain spell does fire damage to any enemy unit within your domain, every turn. The Life domain spell heals your damaged units every turn. Death wizards can cast the Domain of Darkness spell, which cloaks their entire domain (only to enemies, naturally). Of course, there are a variety of counter-spells that you can employ to get around domain spells. It doesn't pay to waltz into enemy territory unprepared.



At the start, your wizard's domain is quite small, but you can increase its radius by putting him in a city with a Wizard's Tower, and you can increase it even further by building Tower improvements. This makes it much more beneficial to keep your wizard at home, rather than sending him off to explore. "In *Age of Wonders*, your leader was always leading your armies into battle," says Sas. "This caused problems, because the AI wouldn't do that because if he lost, he'd be out of the game. The player can always just reload, so he ended up with an extra strong combat unit." Now the main character is more passive. He can roam around



(and in some scenarios, he'll have to), but most of the time you'll want to keep him in a tower.

You do have one other spellcasting option for units outside your domain—heroes. Many of the heroes in the game can cast combat spells, and they don't have to be within your domain borders to use them. "Your heroes act as your magical spearheads," says Sas. "Like Nazgul that you can send to do your bidding."

EVER QUESTING

Triumph wants to maintain the first game's role-playing flavor, but they have changed their approach. You won't find the sprawling dungeons that littered the map in the original game here. "They are going to be simplified," says Sas. "All the areas will be very small above ground or underground maps—no exploration. All your exploration is done in the world map."

The Magic Vault is one example of the revamped dungeon areas. It is a neutral site, guarded by some sort of critter and various protection spells. If you choose to explore it, you'll have to fight the guardian. Succeed and you get to keep whatever treasure (a spell, in this case) is inside the Vault.

To offset the simplified dungeons, Triumph has added a pantheon of four deities (all right, it's a small pantheon) to the game. Deities will offer you quests from time to time, sometimes as a scripted event when you explore a certain area on the map, sometimes just out of the blue. They act as a balancing element in the game, and also a catalyst to maintain friction between different wizards. The Life deity might ask you raze a nearby Death node in exchange for several Nymph units, the Chaos deity might ask you to break an alliance with another wizard for a large sum of gold. You can ignore the deities if you like, or you can build shrines in your town to improve your relations (completing their quests helps, too).

MASTER OF MUNICIPALITIES

Speaking of building, you'll be doing more of it in *Age of Wonders II*. "We aim to have fewer cities in the game, but they can be expanded more," Sas explains. Some improvements (such as the Builder's Hall or the Barracks) allow you to build new units or siege engines; others (such as the wood or stone walls and the magical force field) make your cities more defensible. Some upgrades give you entirely new abilities. You can build teleportation portals in your Wizard's Towers, for instance, which allow you to quickly move troops around the map. "They really help in the endgame, by reducing the amount of time it takes to travel your empire," says Sas.

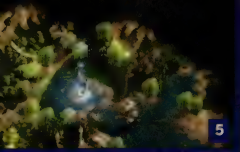
Most of the units that you build in your cities are "standard" troops—infantry, cavalry, war machines, and the like. The more fantastical creatures (dragons, fairies, and maybe—just maybe—dire penguins) now have to be magically summoned.

The Pioneer is the most notable new unit in the game; like *Civilization's* Settler unit, you can use the Pioneer to build various improvements such as bridges and watchtowers and, most importantly, build new towns. Some maps might start you off with only your wizard, a pioneer, and a few combat troops, leaving you to start your new empire from scratch.

BATTLE WEARY

Eventually it all comes down to combat. The battle maps in the original *Age of Wonders* were great in theory, but they had a few problems in practice. They were too large, and it often took too long to reach the enemy and get the action rolling. The unit icons were small and difficult to see against the terrain. The largest army in the world couldn't take a walled town if they lacked a catapult or a battering ram, which led to some rather unorthodox strategies. "It was very frustrating because you had a huge army, but you still had to buy a simple battering ram and then bring it all the way across the map," says Sas. "This was also a problem for the AI, because it would send its siege engines across the maps and players would intercept them."

Triumph is addressing all these issues. The maps are smaller, the unit sprites are much larger, and the terrain is much easier on the eyes. You can close with the enemy on your first turn, if you choose. Only siege engines can break walls, but any unit can attack the city gates. It takes longer, and enemies standing on the



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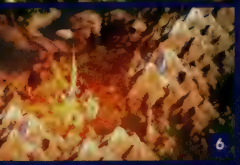

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[1] You no longer need siege engines to breach city gates, although they do speed up the process considerably. >>> [2] Units are larger in both the battle maps and on the main map, the colored bullets tell you how many attacks your unit will get at the end of its move. >>> [3] Like the original, the sequel will ship with a scenario editor. >>> [4] The new battle maps are smaller and simpler, and enemy armies will start the battle in closer proximity to each other. >>> [5] Taste the rainbow... >>> [6] A fire wizard sets down in his new home city. >>> [7] You must choose how many points to allocate to spell research and mana production.

7

NEW BLOOD

A lot of your favorite units from the original game will also be in the sequel, along with a few new faces. These are just a few of the new units that you'll encounter...

Pioneer: This critical new unit founds cities and can build non-city structures such as watchtowers and bridges.

Archon Charioteer: This Archon advanced cavalry unit can either attack with his spear or shoot with his bow.

Black Angel: You will need Death magic to summon this creature. Its Touch of Death ability can kill living creatures on a successful roll.

Draconian Crusher: This Draconian unit inherits the dragon's raw strength but lacks the special Draconian abilities that their other units have.

Frostling Mammoth: This Frostling wall crusher comes complete with cold immunity. It packs a lot of punch, too.

Minotaur: Summoned with Earth Magic, the Minotaur is an elite infantry unit with block and charge abilities. It runs very fast.

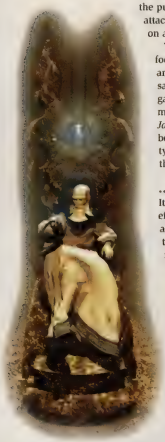
Tigran Catmaster: The Tigran advanced cavalry rides a saber-tooth tiger. He can shoot his bow or employ mount attacks.

Ice Dragon: Summoned with air magic, this unit can freeze enemies with its cold breath, and might also gain a lightning-based special attack in the final game.

AGE OF WONDERS II: [1] Hardware accelerated particle effects make for killer pyrotechnics. >>> [2] A wooden palisade keeps the enemy at bay... for a little while. >>> [3] Somebody razed my towns... note the domain borders. >>> [4] Time to cast Enchant Weapon.

walls get free attacks while you are doing it, but at least your massive army won't be stopped cold by a single infantry unit behind a wooden palisade. Triumph is also considering giving infantry units on walls the ability to drop boiling oil, to help make them more effective in sieges.

The 3D terrain adds an extra dimension (pardon the pun) to combat as well. Missile units get an attack bonus if they are higher than their target—on a hill, for instance, or atop a city wall.



The main objective is to keep the game focused on what's fun. "We wanted to lower the amount of time that you spend in the battles," says Sas. "Sometimes—especially in multiplayer games—people would be very reluctant to move into range. They were playing it like *Jagged Alliance*, where you measure the number of hexes you are moving. But this isn't that type of game—the battles are just one part of the game."

...AND MORE POLISH

It goes without saying that a large part of the effort is focused on improving what was already good about the game. The game features an all-new engine that combines 3D terrain with 2D sprites. Hardware accelerated particle effects for spells and many ambient animations round out the visual package. It looks fantastic.

The interface has been completely remodeled; the floating windows of the first game have been replaced by a better-organized interface bar that is fixed at the bottom of the screen. "You never want to lose your view of the main map," says Sas. "In the first game we had a lot of pop-up windows... we tried to remove that."

Both the classic turn-based and simultaneous turn-based modes make a return appearance ("Our fans would kill us if we removed that," quips Sas), and Triumph hopes to support both Internet multiplayer and play-by-email. Like the first game, the scenario editor will be part of the package, but this time around you'll get a random map generator as well. The kitchen sink is in there somewhere.

CALLING IN REINFORCEMENTS

Fortunately they won't have to do all this alone—Phil Steinmeyer and the crew at PopTop Studios (makers of *Railroad Tycoon II* and *Tropico*) are lending a hand. "They've been giving feedback on builds," says Sas. "They basically play a producer role."

Steinmeyer's motivation for getting involved with the project is simple: he was a fan of the original game. "I loved the deep strategies and excellent balance of *Age of Wonders*," he says. "PopTop can help Triumph and *Age of Wonders II* by sharing our experience—we're bigger and have been around for longer than Triumph—and by providing extra resources for the project."

Some of those resources come in the form of cut scenes and looping animations that appear in some of the scenario briefings. Others are subtler—suggestions regarding game balance, or tweaks to the interface. "You probably recognize the hover help bar from Phil's games," says Sas, referring to the status bar at the bottom of the screen that provides information about any screen element that you move the cursor over. "He told us that tool tips are too slow; people want to get information immediately when they move their mouse over things."

Steinmeyer is confident that the collaboration will lead to great things. "*Age of Wonders II* is really being developed the right way," he says. "Rather than just put out a quick sequel in 12 months, the Triumph team has taken two and a half years to overhaul what was already a great game. The 2D graphic engine is beautiful, the art and music are great, but most importantly the gameplay is stronger than ever. I think for a lot of gamers, *Age of Wonders II* will be a game they get hundreds of hours of gameplay out of, and that will stay on their hard drives for months, if not years." ●

HEROES OF MIGHT AND MAGIC IV. [5] The detail on the new maps is astounding. >>> [6] Argh, pirates! >>> [7] The look is 3D, but the game is still pure 2D. >>> [8] A rustic stockade.

SOLDIERING ON

Heroes of Might and Magic IV continues the legend

by Robert Mayer

When you think of fantasy strategy, your first thought is probably *Heroes of Might and Magic*. New World Computing's long-running series started as a spin-off of the *Might and Magic* role-playing games, but has garnered an enthusiastic audience of its own. Now entering its fourth iteration, the venerable line is undergoing the most significant changes since *Heroes II* back in 1995. No, it's not gone 3D or real-time, but even veteran players have many changes in store.

With *Heroes IV*, New World is looking to give the series a "very serious visual face lift, a much needed one," says 3DO's James Dickinson. The goal is to keep doing everything that makes the games what they are, only to do it better and with more finesse. He says you'll get the same elements you've seen in the past, revisited, and for fans that's probably not a bad thing at all. You'll get loads of maps, only prettier. Tons of spells and skills for heroes only better organized and more balanced. Heaps of monsters, but this time you'll be able to build armies without a hero to lead them. If it was in the previous games, it's probably here, too, only more of it.

Heroes are game's focus, and perhaps the area where you'll see the biggest change from past games. "We wanted to make the heroes more diverse and interesting, and to give them more room to grow over long games or campaigns," says New World's Jon Van Caneghem, the prime mover behind all things *Might and Magic*. The biggest change is that heroes are now combat units, rather than detached spectators. In combat, heroes fight just like groups of monsters, albeit with potentially much more ability. Hero effects, like boosts to morale, only operate within a set radius of the hero, a radius that increases with experience. Of course, having heroes in combat increases the chance they'll die, and that's being addressed here too. Surviving monsters can carry a deceased hero back to town for resurrection, and you'll be able to rescue captured heroes from durance vile. Gone are the days of fleeing heroes recycling at various taverns.

Building up your hero is going to be more interesting as well, New World promises, largely because you won't be able to do it all. You'll have to make choices on what skills you take, and each of the 11 starting classes of heroes will have distinct characteristics and abilities. In past *Heroes* games, this wasn't generally the case. "They were necromancers, or they were not," says 3DO spokesperson Kate Hedstrom of previous heroes. "That was not necessarily a good way of going." There are also five magical schools (Life, Death, Order, Chaos and Nature) and four non-magical skills (Combat, Nobility, Scouting, and Tactics). Balance is the key. "When we re-created the magic system," says Van Caneghem, "we knew magic had to be effective, but not so strong that you wouldn't want to create some thuggish Barbarian who just carried an axe around all the time." In *Heroes IV*, either path can lead to victory.

There's more, of course. You won't lose the game if you have no heroes and no towns, because monster stacks can move autonomously. Battlefields get a faux 3D facelift, and siege battles will be more complex and sophisticated. Artifacts? Tons. Creatures? Hordes. Editor? Of course. Six campaigns, and scenarios totaling over 50 maps. The quantity is certainly there but most of all, Van Canegham says, "*Heroes IV* still 'feels' like a *Heroes* game." And that, after all, is what matters. ●

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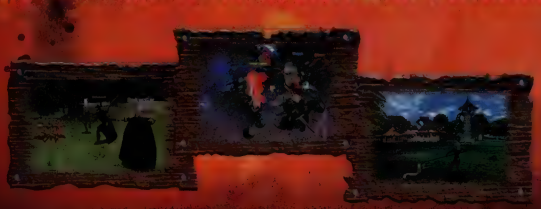

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THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE HORDE

Blizzard continues to tune the gameplay in WarCraft III

by Cindy Yans

While it's been around for a long time, and you've probably heard most of what there is to hear about *WarCraft III: Reign of Chaos*, it's still arguably the most anticipated product of the niche we're exploring, if not of early 2002.

In case you've been fasting in the desert with your head in the sand, *WarCraft III* is the latest offering in the *WarCraft* series of real-time strategy games. Its grandfather, *WarCraft: Orcs and Humans*, along with *Command & Conquer*, just about birthed the genre. In the *WarCraft* world fiction, (one of the most intense back stories ever) it's been nearly 15 years since the war between the orcs and humans ended, and now the world is facing the wrath of The Burning Legion. Originally planned as a playable race, the Burning Legion seemed to serve better as an enemy NPC force, leaving four other playable races for you to contend with: human, orc, the brand new dark elf, and the undead.

At this writing there was no news about when the game will go into beta testing, or whether there will be a sequel. But sequels are born from revenue, aren't they?

There are a few notable things to mention that we didn't cover in our earlier feature story (CGM 122). Unlike the Heroes in *StarCraft* or *WarCraft II*, the ones here are special units that you recruit and command directly. The developers have upped the inventory for Heroes from four items to six. During early testing, it turned out that players did not have room for merchants' consumables.

To inspire you not to just sit in your corner garnering the inevitable multitudes, they made several changes. First, they have ditched the Mana Stone concept. Previously you needed Mana stones to recruit a Hero; now Hero creation relies on your gold supply, but you will receive a free champion at the beginning of each game. The developers believe that with Creeps (neutral NPCs) dropping gold instead of Mana Stones, you'll have more incentive to spread out earlier in the game. And speaking of Heroes, each one has a unique and powerful Ultimate Spell, which, when they reach level 5, they can cast only once every game-day.

Also an interesting concept to that end is "Upkeep," which Blizzard feels offers a boost in the game's tactical management as well as motivating you to play more aggressively. Upkeep comes in three flavors, None, Low, and High. In each mode, the AI takes a look at how much food you have, and bases the speed at which your little workers can mine gold on that amount. In other words, the more units you have, the more food you'll need, and the more food you produce, the less gold will be available. You begin at No Upkeep (where the gold flows freely), and as you expand your forces the Upkeep quotient rises. This makes it a difficult decision whether or not to try and amass that huge indestructible last-minute army—a good idea that will provide an organic unit cap.

In multiplayer, you can play any of the playable races, and if all goes well, they will be balanced so that each stands an equal chance at victory. Neutral units will also appear in multiplayer games, introducing many possibilities. One of the interesting new additions to *WarCraft III* is that if you ally with another race, your combination group gains "special abilities" that neither race would have had on its own. The multiplayer game limit is finally set at 12 players, and, just in case you were worried about looking chic, the tentative but still thrilling color choices are: red, blue, teal, purple, yellow, orange, brown, gray, bright green, dark green, light blue, and, gulp, pink.

We want the Heroes and dark elves *today*, of course, but it's anyone's guess when we'll actually see this game. However, if we still know Blizzard, we'll get it "when it's ready." ●

WARCRAFT III: [1] Hamn Magesinger starts in clifftop warfare. >>> [2] Rage Winterchill: "Life's a bitch and then you die." >>> [3] All things point to Dolar Dawnweaver. >>> [4] Struck down by divine power. >>> [5] Arius seeks the Holy Aura.

WARLORDS BATTTLECRY II: [6] The campaign game plays out over a RISK-like strategic map. >>> [7] Oh my, it's a plague of dragons! Get the fire extinguishers. >>> [8] Your hero has access to all sorts of magic items.

ONCE MORE INTO THE BREACH

Warlords Battlecry II dives into the real-time strategy maelstrom

by Robert Mayer

What's in a name? Well, an awful lot if you are making fantasy strategy games. The "real-time strategy" label instantly rings warning bells with the old guard, who cut their teeth on *Sword of Aragon* and *Master of Magic*, and for whom the genre is pretty much synonymous with the number of the beast. Of course, dubbing a game real-time also makes the devotees of *StarCraft* and *Red Alert* expect a certain pace and style of gameplay, which if not forthcoming tends to cause frothing at the mouth and an irresistible urge to post on Usenet. The only no-lose audience might be the marketing folks, for whom it's a code word for "will sell like *Age of Empires*."

Pity, then, Strategic Studies Group, the plucky Australians who have been turning out quality war and strategy titles for about two decades now. After building a rather fanatical following with their turn-based *Warlords* line of fantasy strategy games, in 1999 the company released *Warlords Battlecry*, a game that featured the setting, history, and protagonists from the original *Warlords* series, with one important twist: it was real-time. "Heresy!" screamed the faithful. "Abomination!" howled the loyal followers. "Pretty good," said the critics, and purchasers seemed to agree, at least to the extent that SSG is working on a sequel.

Despite the uproar, *Battlecry* offered much of what the *Warlords* series had always been about: heroes, monsters, combat, unit improvement, and great variety. It played nothing like most typical games, being more complex and slower paced, yet many turn-based fans never even tried it, because it was, well, a real-time strategy game, don'tcha know? This time around, SSG is trying very hard to overcome both prejudices.

I NEED A HERO

Like the original, *Battlecry II* is a fantasy strategy game that plays out in real time. SSG builds the game around your hero, chosen from a dozen races. As in most real-time games, you gather resources, build units, upgrade technology, and beat the crap out of your neighbor before he can do the same to you. There is a lot more detail here than you usually find in the genre, though, from spellcasting to unit upgrades, and your units and particularly your hero advance in power and ability with each victorious battle. Your hero is also a builder, and you often have to balance the hero's fighting abilities against the need for building and resource conversion.

Given that much of the game's interface, combat system, and general structure are pretty much standard fodder, what sets *Battlecry II* apart? "It's really all about polish," says Programming Director Steve Fawkner. "The little things, and the overall feel, really." The goal with the sequel is to add more of everything, without losing that *Warlords* feel. Some actions, like defensive spells cast by buildings, can cost resources. Workers don't actively harvest resources, but they can garrison mines and increase production. Heroes gain power and abilities in RPG fashion, and you can take your hero with you from game to game and even into multiplayer battles. While the mechanics of play are familiar, *Battlecry II* feels more like *Disciples* or *Age of Wonders* than *Age of Empires*. Small groups of high quality are far more powerful than hordes of throwaway units, and careful strategy more important than an orc rush. And of course, you can issue orders while paused.

THE PLAY'S THE THING

SSG's game sends you scurrying to capture (in this case, convert) resources, and sets you on the never-ending technology treadmill

WARLORDS BATTLECRY II: [1] Combat gets pretty fancy when the spell-effects fly. >>> [2] The purple people seem nonplussed by the siege engine attack. >>> [3] The game's landscapes are varied and detailed. >>> [4] Battles can be epic affairs.

researching upgrade after unit upgrade. Each upgrade depends on a variety of things, from the level aof your palace (think Town Center) to the previous development of prerequisite technologies and units. Rapid expansion is key, as depending on the type of map you're playing on resources may be scarce. The computer plays an aggressive game, usually, and you don't get that much of a grace period before having to defend your "base" against often substantial AI assaults.

You get the usual run of modern features, including formations, waypoints, reasonably intelligent unit AI, adequate pathfinding, and a good interface, but you also get a fully developed spell system with a generous selection of hotkeys and shortcuts. Spell casting units and heroes are crucial to victory, as many races are short on brawn but long on magical affinity. It's the prevalence of magic and magical creatures—demons, elves, that sort of thing—that helps separate *Battlecry II* from more mundane strategy games. The pacing, though, with its real-time flow, distinguishes the game from the turn-based fantasy strategy crowd, landing it rather in a niche of its own.

"We're an evolutionary RTS—RTS with a twist, Fawkner says. We're trying to provide players with a new experience within a genre that they already know and are comfortable with," he explains. The entire game is geared towards getting you out of the base and into combat.

Another thing that sets the game apart is the intricate balance between the twelve races and their respective units. Every hero, for example, has twenty points distributed between strength, dexterity, intelligence, and charisma. Humans, the perennial jacks of all trades, have five points in each category; a Fey hero, a paragon of magic, has a strength of two but sixes in the other three statistics. Daemon's are super strong, the Undead super smart (go figure); the rest are more balanced, with strong tendencies in one direction or another. The ten hero skills build off of the basic statistics, so that Magery, for instance, is equal to double your intelligence, and Combat double your strength. Other skills include Merchant, Training, Command, Speed, Health, Morale, Resistance, and Conversion, making for a lot of hero diversity.

Playing as an Orc is going to feel different than playing as a Wood Elf, particularly as each race gets its own group of units and upgrades. Some races will have hordes of melee units, while others will specialize in spell casters. In the campaign, with its area-based strategic overlay and variety of opponents, learning your strengths and weaknesses will be key to victory. In skirmishes against humans or the AI, being able to adapt to what your foes throw at you could mean the difference between winning and losing. In this respect, SSG seems to have well captured the nuances that characterized the different factions in the turn-based *Warlords* titles. You can even build Lord Bane and Sartek from the earlier games, for your evildoing pleasure.

THE STANDARD BEARER

Like it or not, the *Battlecry* games have become SSG's standard bearers for the new millenium. Though a new turn-based *Warlords* game is also in the works (see p.50), there are probably many fans of fantasy strategy who don't even know such a beast exists. Ironically, turn-based fantasy strategy games seem to be having something of a renaissance now—*Age of Wonders 2*, *Disciples 2*, *Heroes of Might and Magic IV*, SSG's own *Warlords IV*, the list goes on. Nevertheless, the real-time arena is the high-profile market for this sort of game, and Ubi Soft is putting its money on the Australians. Given their track record, it's probably a safe bet. ●

DISCIPLES: DARK PROPHECY: [5] You now see combat from a more intimate camera angle that allows you to further identify with your party. >>> [6] Jack Frost nipping at your butt. >>> [7] Oh sure, sticks will get 'im.

REBORN AND POLISHED

The maturation of Disciples: Dark Prophecy

by Cindy Yans

After *Disciples:* *Sacred Lands* released to mostly positive reviews (although some might say it got buried amid the competition) it is not surprising to see Strategy First launch a sequel two years later. While only one mode of play was available in the early version of the game used for this article, it still delivers the overall atmosphere and gameplay dynamics, at least in the saga portion of the game. Big surprise: *Disciples 2* plays just like, well, *Disciples*, and as with most sequels, keeps the flavor of the original and enhances it in many ways. And, again as with most sequels, it simply tries to answer the tumultuous cry of, "More! Give us *more*!"

IN CASE YOU'RE NEW TO THIS

Disciples: Dark Prophecy picks up ten years after the original conflict. If you happen to be unfamiliar with the *Disciples* storyline, it involves a classic "conflict among the races." Four different races share the gameworld of Nevendaar: the virtuous Humans of The Empire, the fire-and-brimstone-coated Legions of the Damned, the industrious Dwarves, and the Undead Hordes, who, like most undead things, are actually *not* undead, but are, instead, truly dead. They should probably be called The Walking Dead Hordes (of the Dead).

The "dark prophecy" is centered around the Chosen One, who either saves or destroys the four races. After eons of wars gone by, each race tries to recoup and regain control of the Sacred Lands, using the usual turn-based strategy methods of battle, furtiveness, magic, and diplomacy. Each race has a different advantage specific to it; for instance, the Humans have the power of healing, and Dwarves are very slow, but also very powerful. The Legions of the Damned move with great alacrity, and the Undead Hordes are more evenly balanced than any of the others. Since you're playing one race at a time, your strategy will depend upon just whom you're playing against.

GLITZ 'N' BITS

Despite the fact that they tried to keep the system requirements as low as possible by adding many scalable features, it doesn't look as though they "skimped," building the new game from the ground up. It has an almost Baroque-feeling atmosphere. All of the art is new from units to interface, and they've added many translucency tools for the artists to really

DISCIPLES: DARK PROPHECY: [1] A cold effect, coming along nicely. >>> [2] Note the almost harsh style of the architecture. >>> [3] Dear Thor, would you please send a... Oh, thanks!

AGE OF MYTHOLOGY: [4] A meteor on both your houses. >>> [5] Norse Age—where everyone including the ox wears green. >>> [6] A classic view of the Egyptian Age.

create really stunning tableaux. The first thing you'll notice is that the atmosphere is decidedly darker than in *Disciples*. It does look lovely, however—very compelling and dynamic, like most of the newer games of this ilk.

There are three gameplay modes: long-term sagas, stand-alone quests, and multiplayer matches. You can take each of the four races individually across a saga, which will consist of four story-driven quests. Only the saga mode was available for this preview, and we found that it's easy to lose yourself in gameplay wondering what might happen if you chose different units, a different race—all of these possibilities promising quite a lot of replay potential.

The biggest difference between sagas and stand-alone quests is that you can't play saga during multiplayer. They are designed to tell the story of the race around which they are built. During these sagas, your Leaders (Hero-type units) become more powerful as they gain experience. You can then export them into the stand-alone quests, or integrate them into custom-made scenarios, as the scenario editor will ship with the game. Only after you've played all of the sagas, though, will you discover the entire storyline. On the other hand, there are standalone quests designed to be very compliant with multiplayer, and you can play all of the races.

BUT IT'S TWO, TWO, TWO GENRES IN ONE!

The developers feel that one of the biggest strengths of their design is the strong influence of role-playing factors. And much the same as *Age of Wonders*, it absolutely screams *Heroes of Might and Magic—Warlords* hybrid. "I think the category 'role-playing strategy' fits the game well," says Lead Designer Danny Belanger. "Resource gathering and management, exploring and conquering the lands are a part of the game, but our battle system is closer to that of a role-playing game." And that is true to a degree.

Leaders (the Hero types) equip via a paper doll interface, all of the units develop and gain experience and increase in level, and the storyline is quite deep. Instead of madly trying to rack up a million units, you'll find that your smaller parties, if well designed, will be powerful enough to complete their objectives. Party composition will become very important—that was easy to see in the preview build. "I like the fact that in *Disciples*, Demons and Angels don't appear together in the parties," says Belanger, "and I think that this helps keep the story consistent and it immerses the player into the universe."

Each party leader can only carry a maximum of two items into battle. And you can't swap them out while in combat. These items, such as enchanted weapons, scrolls, potions of constipation, and so on, have very specific uses in battle, so the need to decide what to bring in with you adds to the tactical management of your Leader stacks, and feeds the RPG component. The need to think and plan in this way before every confrontation adds a dimension that didn't appear in the first game.

AND NOW... THE BIG EVENT

According to the developers, probably the most important game change is the addition of a new Event System. Throughout the game, certain moments will occur—reaching a specific waypoint, the defeat of a specific enemy—that will trigger one or a series of events. You might walk into an ambush, or discover that your path is blocked. You might help a party of elves, and be granted safe passage when in Elfin territory. During these events, a dialogue window will explain the situation. In the first game, you also received messages, but they were generic—it didn't matter who you were. But now, the customized messages are specific to your party and your race. And it is via this device that the game is better able to deliver the storyline.

Lead Designer Pro Sotos said, "because it's so flexible the event system is really being used in creative ways by the scenario designers." He went on to explain that, "the event system is only limited by the imagination of the scenario designer," so when the game does ship with its editor, the modmakers will have a much more powerful design tool.

Disciples: Sacred Lands was one of those games that everyone probably should have played, but didn't. A good look at the current state of the game is compelling evidence that maybe this time "should've could've would've" will turn into "did." So look toward the spring, when we'll also see *Heroes of Might and Magic IV*, and *Age of Wonders II*, and... oops, a full slate. Perhaps *Disciples II* can stand shoulder to shoulder with them. ●

OF GODS AND MEN

Age of Mythology veers, but not too far

by Cindy Yans

"Deliver ye the Osiris from every evil thing, from every evil obstruction, from every dire attack of an enemy, and from that deadly snarer with knife-like words, and from men, and gods, and Spirit-souls, and the damned, on this day, on this night, on this present festival of the fifteenth day, and in this year, and from the things of evil thereof."–The Papyrus of Ani

Over the last several years, in a flash of gunpowder, Ensemble Studios has taken the real-time strategy world by storm. Its *Age of Empires*, *Age of Kings*, and *Conquerors* expansion brought the genre to the next level and have rather served as a milestone for so many other products. For instance, in LucasArts' *Star Wars Battlegrounds*, you can almost make a one-to-one correlation between its gameplay elements and those of the *Age* titles. And why not? Excellence breeds excellence, and this is what Microsoft and Ensemble are hoping to do in their latest offering, *Age of Mythology*.

To once again embrace the "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" philosophy of game design, instead of coming up with something entirely new, Ensemble is choosing to keep the basic gameplay model, enhance it, bring it into a non-straight-historical context, and give it a face lift. *Age of Mythology* has all of the staples of the real-time genre including gathering of resources, fortifying containments, building troops, and waging wars. So what's different?

First of all, we are looking at ancient history where people invented mythological elements to explain the things they were otherwise unable to understand. The game focuses on three civilizations, Egyptian, Greek, and Norse, and relies heavily upon belief in their deity-summoning abilities to call down the wrath of god upon their enemies. The choice of these three cultures enables a world design that Ensemble says includes a more Asian area, a Northern European one, and a Mediterranean one. And instead of "true magic," an aspect that might detract from this game's inclusion in the fantasy genre, there are, of course, meteors, lightning, earthquakes, healing, and protection just waiting to be summoned from the heavens—or at least from Mount Olympus.

A new 3D engine goes a long way toward proving that *Age of Mythology* is not "just" a sequel or an upgrade. The game world is incredibly detailed. You can also see evidence of this attention to detail in the units' appearance. When you upgrade a weapon, you will *see* your units wielding the new one. Of course the opposition will see the status of your units, but since you show them yours, they inevitably show you theirs. The units leave footprints in the snow, buildings' roofs collapse, and all is right with the world.

Another important thing to note is that they are paying a lot more attention to the single-player campaign this time around. They plan to create a real story, with all the elements of good storytelling, including plot, character, conflict, and emotion. There will be only one long single-player campaign, but in it you will be able to play with all the game's cultures. So instead of mission briefings breaking up the game into fragmented chunks, there will be seamless-ness. The mission briefings will air with the in-game cinematics. You'll play a hero trying to get across the Old World. In doing so, You will help in the siege of Troy, meet with Odysseus, and reassemble the skeleton of Osiris.

The title's gameplay philosophy is somewhat similar to that of its precursors, except that Ensemble is providing incentive for you *not* to have to race up the Tree of Ages. There may be benefits from advancing more constructively. So summon up the will to summon up Ra, Osiris, Set, Zeus, Poseidon, Hades, Odin, Thor, and the rascal Loki, when Age of Mythology summons itself onto store shelves this Fall. ●

TACOPS WITH ELVES

Whacking away in Warlords IV

by Tom Chick

Traditionally, there have been two types of fantasy strategy gamers: fans of 3DO's *Heroes of Might and Magic* and fans of SSG's *Warlords*. It was a deeply partisan issue along the lines of PCs vs. Macs, Republicans vs. Democrats, or cat- vs. dog-lovers. *Heroes* fans preferred the fancy graphics and tactical combat. *Warlords* fans preferred the level of detail and strategic gameplay. Now both camps are moving closer to each other. While *Heroes of Might and Magic IV* will deepen its gameplay a bit, *Warlords IV* will add a fancy new graphics system and, brace yourself, tactical combat.

This latter addition might be controversial for some *Warlords* adherents. Some gamers—and developers like Sid Meier—are of the opinion that stepping outside a game to play a separate tactical combat breaks up the flow. One minute you're sweeping across the map with your armies, conquering cities, establishing a front line, and bringing up the reserves; the next minute, you're shuffling men across a chessboard and watching them whack each other with swords.

TIC TAC TICS

This two-games-in-one approach adds an extra layer that many gamers enjoy, but it can feel superfluous if the AI isn't up to the task. The tactical AI in the *Masters of Orion* series and the earlier *Heroes of Might & Magics* was notoriously weak. "We're confident our AI routines will make sensible choices," says *Warlords IV*'s executive producer, Gregor Whiley, "Some of the design decisions about tactical combat have been intended to make the AI decision-making easier. As far as the decision being controversial, my feeling is that a large number of *Warlords III* fans wanted tactical combat, and most of the remainder will keep an open mind and see how the game turns out." If any players are adamantly opposed to it, SSG will include the option to turn tactical combat off and let the battles automatically resolve.

Warlords' armies reappear here in their traditional stacks. When they meet up, they'll jump to a tactical map, where the player controls each unit's movement and attacks. "Units have quite a few different attributes for tactical combat," Whiley explains, "These include ranges for moving and attacking, melee effectiveness, missile ranges, armor strength, morale, and resistance to various battlefield effects like fear and poison. Heroes can join humanoid units and greatly boost their combat capabilities. Units that fail morale tests and break may be taken prisoner."

HERO HEAT-O

As in the previous games, heroes will be a centerpiece in *Warlords IV*. Many aspects of the heroes will be the same, including inventory for magical items, the option to go on quests during a scenario to earn special rewards, and your favorite heroes carrying over between scenarios (you can even use your them in multiplayer games). But the way skills and spells work will be completely new. Spell research takes place in various cities, and heroes stock up on spell crystals, each good for casting that particular spell once. Main map spells include Scouting, Haste, Espionage, Fly, and Create Ford. Spells during tactical combat are divided into offensive and defensive categories. During each round of a combat, a hero can cast one from each category. "This will make defensive spells more important and popular than they otherwise might have been," Whiley notes. The more a hero casts a spell, the better he or she gets at it. Eventually, heroes have a chance to learn that spell as a repeatable skill that doesn't require crystals. "We'll be careful about which spells can become skills," Whiley says, "There will be no permanent teleport."

CITIFICATION REALIZATION

They are also revising the city system. In some scenarios, you'll be able to build your own cities, something new to the series. Cities start out at level one, gathering resources from sites on the

WARLORDS IV: [1] This is not your father's Warlords. >>> [2-A] The sites you'll see on the strategic map: visit shipwrecks to look for treasure, shrines to get quests and foundries for more powerful armies.

1

map within a limited range. Among the structures you can build in a city are administrative buildings that increase the city's level. Each level increases the city's resource gathering range and army capacity. Cities can get to level three, with a lone level four city as each side's capital. For instance, Elves can build Green, Emerald, and then Jade palaces to increase their cities' levels, but only their capital will house the powerful Sage Palace.

Similar to *Heroes of Might and Magic*, there will be a unique build tree for each race's cities. For example, once the Dwarves build their level three administrative building, the Bailey, they can build a Foundry that creates Catapults and Bronze Golems. A Foundry can then be upgraded with an Iron Works for more powerful armies. Army recruitment, also, is similar to that in *Heroes*. Military buildings generate a certain number of units each day, up to their maximum capacity. A Dwarven Lodge produces two Dwarf Axemen each day. A level one city reaches its limit after producing 20 Axemen. If you don't pay to hire them, the Lodge stops production and the 20 Axemen wait for you to recruit them. But a Lodge in a level two city can hold up to 60 Axemen.

A PBEM-FREE ZONE

Warlords IV sports a brand new game engine and shares terrain graphics with SSG's new real time strategy game *Warlords Battlecry 2*. It will also feature a similar non-linear dynamic campaign, in which you'll be able to conquer provinces that give special bonuses. The multiplayer component, however, will serve only two players. "Each tactical combat will take an appreciable amount of time to complete," Whiley says, "And this fact restricts the network play options." Unfortunately, *Warlords IV* won't have play-by-email support, which Whiley points out doesn't fit well with tactical combat either.

However, as with the previous titles, there will be a full scenario editor. Although the elaborate artwork will make it difficult for players to create custom sides like those supported in the previous games (there was even a World War I mod), *Warlords IV* will still be wide open for enterprising players to create their own scenarios, with custom maps and variable victory conditions. And after the last two versions' dramatic subtitles, *Reign of Heroes* and *Darklords Rising*, what's in store for *Warlords IV*? "Subtitles are the province of the UbiSoft marketing department," Whiley deadpans. ●

Some of the Rest

WARRIOR KINGS

Supremacy amidst knights and demons

South London developer Black Cactus Ltd. and Microids are getting ready to present this 3D real-time fantasy strategy game set in a medieval world that has gone to ruin. You are a warrior king attempting to reunite the shards of the once great empire and become its supreme ruler. As the single-player campaign progresses, you will choose among three paths to follow.

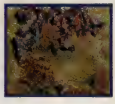
The Imperial path calls upon the power of the church, allowing you to use your piety to wage a holy war, relive the Inquisition, and have fun burning heretics in your quest for domination, conquest, and control. The Renaissance path embraces knowledge and science as you use merchant and trade skills, inventions, banking, war machines, and gunpowder to further your empire. And finally, the Pagan anarchist will summon beasts from the Underworld in celebration of freedom, druidism, earth and demon magic, sacrifice, witchcraft, talismans, ecstasy, and uncontrolled passion.

Not only that, the game also features "hills that matter." You can't ask for more than that.

THE DRUID KING

Such a lot of Gaul

The warm waters of the Mediterranean serve as the setting for this real-time strategy adventure. The story takes place during Caesar's conquest of Gaul, during which four main forces (Gauls, Romans, Teutons, and Druids) have strong and conflicting interests.



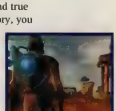
You'll play the game on a number of large maps that support up to 5,000 units per area, and there is a role-playing flavor as you'll see an integration of character development with major battles. The game includes hero stacking, and special unit abilities such as berserk (damage increases as unit's health reduces), charge (charged attacks do five times more damage), death blow (kills the wounded enemies with one attack), freedom (the unit cannot be attached to heroes), spike armor (returns part of the received damage back to the attacking unit), and more.

At the day of the spring equinox, many strongholds fell to the Dogs of Death and paid their toll of blood. Get back at them this spring when *The Druid King* marches forth.

PROJECT NOMADS

Armies of flying machines, biplanes, and zeppelins

On floating islands way above the curling cloud clusters is Radon Labs' *Project Nomads*, another real-time strategy title that's still somewhat down the pike. Using the tried and true premise that you are "somewhere" and have no memory, you awaken to discover that you're lying on a floating island. And not only that, you're a wizard engineer—wait—you're a *flying* wizard engineer that has received the blueprints to a town center from a local ghost. You build the town center and from that moment are in charge of customizing and defending it and your island from attack. Instead of the usual several resources, this game features only one, energy, which must be gathered and stored for construction.



Instead of a game in which you start a new base or town center in each step of the campaign, here your island grows along with you, as you continue to customize it while striving to complete the single-player game consisting of 25 levels with more than 40 different vehicles and 100 buildings. ●

TAKE ME THERE AND MAKE ME A PART OF IT

Part III:

Foot-in-the-door skills for the games industry and beyond

by Kenn Hoekstra,
Raven Software

This is the final part of our series on getting a job in the game industry. Previous articles covered the basics, descriptions of the types of jobs available, and this month's article looks at closing the deal.

You have the drive. You have the experience. As Winston Zeddemore said in *Ghostbusters*, "You've got the tools! You've got the talent!" So how do you show your abilities on a resume, find an open position, get in for an interview, and turn your knowledge and experience into an opportunity to make games for a living? That's a good question. Let's take it one step at a time.

WRITING A RESUME

Most companies see at least several hundred resumes each year. Some contain too much information, some too little, and many fail to comply with even the most basic standards of the resume-writing format. The following suggestions will help transform your resume from a simple piece of paper to your golden ticket into the world of game development.

Use high-quality bond paper with a matching envelope, preferably white or off-white. Write your resume in an easy to read font. Make sure your resume is properly and consistently formatted and thoroughly checked for spelling and grammar. Avoid gimmicks, weird sizes or colors and other risky "jiggery pokery."

Don't exceed a page in length with your resume. Not even Albert Einstein, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Edison, or Sid Meier has the credentials to exceed one page. In fact, the longer your resume, the more it looks like you're trying to hide the fact that you don't have much going for you. Short, concise resumes are those that actually get read.

Include all forms of contact information, including mailing address, phone number, fax number, and email address. Make yourself as easy to reach as possible.

RESUME STRUCTURE

The first section of your resume is the "Objective." This should consist of one or two sentences; absolutely no more. Do not write a me-oriented objective ("I'm looking for position that exploits my design strengths, furthers my growth, and has real opportunities for advancement.") Instead, write a company oriented objective that shows you're team and goal oriented ("I'm a team player looking to help develop innovative games that achieve the company's vision and design goals.") Short and sweet works best here.

Next, in bullet point form, list three to five highlights, each one a physical line long. This is the area in which you can really sell yourself. Readers typically look here first

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because it summarizes your achievements and value. Albert Einstein, for example, might mention these things:

- **Wrote Special Theory of Relativity, disproving several of Newton's laws**
- **Showed how mass and energy were related ($E = MC^2$)**
- **Received the Nobel Prize in 1921**
- **Predicted existence of black holes 50 years before being detected**
- **Involved with the creation of atomic bomb**

In the next section, briefly mention your work history, but only as it pertains to the job you're going after. Don't mention unrelated positions that don't help your cause. Instead, say that you can provide an extensive work history upon request. Don't bother putting down that you worked in a restaurant or bagged groceries (unless you're applying for a job in those industries).

An exception to this rule might be if your position involved management responsibilities, teamwork, extensive customer service work or other responsibilities related to the position you're trying to secure.

Working on game modifications (mods) and independent gaming projects can be listed as work experience. In many cases it can be the only work experience you list beyond your current employment. Since game development experience is the big selling point for most companies, this information is critical.

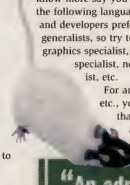
Write your resume in reverse-chronological order, listing your most recent position first. Most employers prefer chronological resumes to other types of resumes. List what you accomplished at each position rather than listing your job duties themselves. "Raised profits by 12% annually" looks better on a resume than "Responsible for financial operation and budgeting of department."

In the education section, don't mention high school. Only mention college, other post-secondary education or other related skills and skill training. Once again, you can mention that a more complete education history is available upon request.

For programmers, don't list every language and operating system under the sun. That makes you look like a jack-of-all-trades, but a master of none.

You're much better off listing one or two languages as your "expertise," and if you know more say you're also "familiar with the following languages." Most companies and developers prefer to hire specialists, not generalists, so try to position yourself as a graphics specialist, 3D engine specialist, AI specialist, network/Internet specialist, etc.

For artists, coders, musicians, etc., you might want to say that samples and demos are available on request.



"An admission that you have much to learn and you're excited about the opportunity to do so is a good thing."

Again, these should be easily accessible. Have demo CDs prepared in advance or have your portfolio available on the Internet. Try to avoid sending unsolicited CDs or sample materials.

Regarding references, go ahead and list two or three. If you have more, you can say "more references available upon request." Expect that the company you're applying to will check your references, so don't try to fake them.

The last piece of the puzzle is often overlooked: the cover letter. This is where you specifically mention why you like the company you're applying to and why you want to work there. This is a great opportunity to "kiss up" a little by specifically mentioning company's products and what you like about the company's vision, etc. Prospective employers love to think you are applying to their company because you have a passion for their work. Keep this letter to one page, don't be too wordy, and maintain professionalism.

Be sure to send your resume the old fashioned way, via standard U.S. mail, unless your prospective employer specifies some other method of contact. E-mail and electronic resumes are becoming more common, but physical resumes are still more professional. A good method to employ is to mail a hard copy of your resume and then follow up with a phone call or an e-mail if you haven't heard from the company in a reasonable amount of time. Having your resume available on the Internet and as an e-mail attachment is a good backup plan.

FINDING AN AVAILABLE POSITION

Your resume is hot off the presses and you're ready to find that dream job. So where do you start looking? Perhaps the best way to look for a job in game development is to go straight to the game developers' websites and look through their job postings. You get direct information about the company that you can use on your resume, in your cover letter and in your interview and the postings are generally more up to date than the ones on the job search sites. Odds are, you already have several game companies in mind.

Several job search websites offer positions in hundreds of fields in which software or game development is only a small part. The sheer size of these resources can't be ignored, however, and they're a good place to get started. You can visit www.monster.com—the definitive job search and placement website. It's well organized with resume posting options and the ability to search by geographical region. Also check out www.flipdog.com. It's not quite as good

"Ask about advancement opportunities. This shows two things. First, that you're interested in the company for the long haul and, secondly, you're not someone who's looking for just any job."

as Monster.com, but includes lots of search options, including geographical searches.

Finally, there's www.geekfinder.com—a funny name, but a useful site. Here, the jobs are all computer and software related. Try a search for "games," "game developer" or a specific job title.

Want to go for a smaller search that's more focused? There are a few gaming-only job search sites out there, including *Game Developer Magazine*'s job listings at www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/jobs_display.php3, and nothing *but* game jobs on www.gamejobs.com

THE INTERVIEW

So, your resume and job search landed you an interview, eh? Congratulations! Now what? Here's what you need to know about interviewing, what you should let potential employers know about you and what you should find out about them. These things might seem like common sense, but you'd be surprised at some of the interview horror stories I could tell you. Let's get down to basics.

Be as flexible as possible. Game companies will fly you to their location for the interview and put you up in a hotel for the night. Try not to be picky about times, flights, hotels or special requests if at all possible. You don't want to come off as "high maintenance."

Show up on time and prepared. Bring a pen and paper, a few copies of your resume and any demo materials or samples you might need.

Dress appropriately. Most game companies have casual dress codes, but that doesn't mean you should show up in cut off shorts and a *Grateful Dead* t-shirt. By the same token, you probably don't need to wear a three-piece suit either. I'd recommend Khaki pants, dress shoes and a shirt with a collar. When in doubt, check with the person setting up the interview.

It's embarrassing to say, but personal hygiene really counts. Make sure you're showered, well groomed and not giving off a powerful scent of aftershave, cologne or perfume. You don't want your interview to be memorable for the wrong reason.

Don't be negative and don't bad-mouth anyone in the industry or anyone you've worked with in the past. The games industry is very small and everyone knows everyone else.

WHAT THEY WANT TO KNOW ABOUT YOU

If you're going to be locked in a room with a bunch of people you don't know working on a long-term project, the interviewer wants to know that you're not going to rock the boat.

Game development takes long hours and sacrifice. You want to convey to your potential employer that you're willing to work long (and odd) hours and are willing to learn and try new things with little complaint. Once again, you don't want to come off as high maintenance.

Don't sell yourself short, but don't act like you know it all either. An admission that you have much to learn and you're excited about the opportunity to do so is a good thing.

Read up on the company you're interviewing with, try out their games and learn as much as you can about everything they do. You don't want to come across as a "brown-noser" or a "fan boy," but you do want to show genuine interest in the company and an interest in working there based on the company's strengths.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THEM

Most interviewers will ask if you have any questions for them, and it's always good to present yourself as knowing what you want, and not being too timid to ask about it. For example, if you don't enjoy the material the company's working on, you're not going to enjoy working for the company.

It's good to know if the team has shipped other titles and how much experience they have. You may want to know how much time is scheduled for the completion of the title. You probably don't want to step into a year-long crunch mode if you can help it.

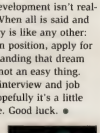
Don't ask this directly, of course, but look for signs and verbal clues that the company is doing well financially. You don't want to relocate only to find yourself jobless. You will want to inquire about insurance, stock options or stock purchase plan, salary structure, profit sharing and any other benefits. Not all game companies are created equal in this regard.

Ask about advancement opportunities. This shows two things. First, that you're interested in the company for the long haul and, secondly, you're not someone who's looking for just any job. Be prepared, though. If the interviewer says there aren't any advancement opportunities, you have to be ready to counter with something like, "Regardless, I think the position sounds challenging and interesting enough for me to see it through and learn a lot."

There are a couple of online interviewing resources worth looking into, such as www.joblink-usa.com/interview.htm for general tips and some great "dos and don'ts" at interview.monster.com, with plenty of tips, tricks, and practice interviews.

JUMP IN FEET FIRST

Getting a job in game development isn't really such a big mystery. When all is said and done, the games industry is like any other: you need to find an open position, apply for it and interview for it. Landing that dream gaming job is certainly not an easy thing. But with these resume, interview and job location tips in hand, hopefully it's a little easier than it was before. Good luck. ●



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kenu Hoekstra is the Project Administrator at Raven Software. He has been in the games industry for five years and his game credits include *Take No Prisoners, Hexen II: Portal of Praevus, Heretic II, Soldier of Fortune, Star Trek: Voyager – Elite Force* and the *Elite Force Expansion Pack*. His current projects include *Soldier of Fortune II: Double Helix* and *Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast*.

TECHNICALITIES

the spice of life

Let's throw some randomness in the mix

As I'm sure some of you have also done by now, I recently played through *Halo* on the Xbox from beginning to end. I won't start cooing about how great it is, except to say that it's been a long time since a game kept me playing until five in the morning when I was rubbing sleep out of my eyes at 2AM. As I often do when I come across a really great game, I tried to break down exactly what's so good about it. While there are many things that come together into a cohesive whole greater than the sum of its parts, I think the main thing is this: *Halo* makes use of dynamic systems that breathe life into the world and add variety to what is normally repetitive.

Most of the game involves running into rooms or big open outdoor areas and shooting up bad guys with very satisfying weapons. That's about it, really. There are no role-playing-like skill development or conversation a la *Deus Ex*. There are no intriguing puzzles, branching campaign, or giant, freely-explorable worlds. But *Halo* features an AI system that makes each combat a totally new experience, even when replaying the same combat over and over, and a physics system that makes cool and unexpected things happen that no script-writer could ever duplicate.

> "I'm all for scripted sequences—the more the merrier, I say—but how about a little variety?"

I thought about how other 3D action/adventure games could apply the base lessons of *Halo* to games that are really not much like it, and I came up with the idea that robust physics and AI really should be used throughout these games, hand in hand with the scripted sequences necessary to advance the story. I'm all for scripted sequences—the more the merrier, I say—but how about a little variety? Instead of triggering that explosion right when you cross some invisible line or open a certain door, why not trigger a random counter that makes the explosion go off in 1-5 seconds? That way, it won't feel like you just hit a trigger. And instead of meticulously scripting all those flying bits of rubble, just start the explosion and let a good physics system handle all the flying pieces, so it looks different every time.

The same could be done with AI. Instead of a scripted battle where one side starts to lose and runs away, let the AI control the battle so it's really dynamic. If the outcome needs to be a certain way, the developers could stack the odds by making some of the characters invulnerable or giving one side really bad aim or something. There are lots of little things game developers can already do to make their worlds seem more dynamic and alive, and keep the same thing from happening the same exact way every time, even within their carefully scripted sequences.

Of course, rigid scripted sequences are only one factor in which games are becoming less dynamic. AI is another barrier to immersion. Combat AI has become very good in immersive 3D games, but the "I'm not in combat" intelligence hasn't advanced much at all. In most games, enemies (and friends for that matter) seem to be waiting around for you to happen upon them. If we're lucky, we get to overhear a conversation, again predictably triggered as we cross some invisible threshold. The AIs are either battling you or are in a looping generic idle state, with no middle ground. How about having a variety of enemies, not just generic guards? People that have different tasks, walk around, go to lunch, go to the bathroom, take cigarette breaks, and are relieved by the next shift? Why not have the occasional greenhorn that freezes up at the moment of truth, stammering and fumbling when they come face to face with the enemy (you)? Enemies sometimes go for help in games now, but it's like a game of tag. They just run to someone else and run back. Where's the part where they stop, and point in your direction while explaining in an out-of-breath shout about the intruder they just saw? In the short term, I'll settle for combat AI that's dynamic enough for enemies to do different interesting things each time I play the same part battle. But to move the "immersive 3D action/adventure" game genre forward, I feel we need to acknowledge the inhabitants of these virtual worlds in a wider scope.

There's been some argument that linear shooters are yesterday's immersive 3D games and titles like *Deus Ex* or *System Shock*, which feature a much greater freedom to explore and perform a variety of actions, are the future. I don't necessarily agree with that. We don't need to have more varied and meaningful interactions with the world, as long as all the inhabitants of that world have more varied and meaningful interactions within it. If variety is the spice of life, then most current games have about as much seasoning as powdered Kraft Macaroni and Cheese. It's time to kick it up a notch. ●

TIP OF THE MONTH

The always-accurate PC clock — Don't you always hate how the clock in Windows seems to get off by a few minutes? Well, Windows XP has taken care of that. Just double-click the time in the taskbar to bring up the Date & Time settings. Make sure you've got the absolutely correct date and time, then click the Internet Time tab. Check the checkbox and pick a time server, and Windows will synchronize with an internet time server once a week. Simple!

Q: I'm running Windows ME on a Dell Dimension 4100 PC with an 866MHz processor and 384 MB RAM. My graphics card is a GeForce 256. I plan to play Return to Castle Wolfenstein and Unreal II on this machine. Will upgrading to a GeForce 3 make much difference in the graphics on my PC? I was thinking about buying a GeForce 3 Ti 200.

Joe

A: An inexpensive GeForce 3-based card, like the Ti 200, would be a pretty good investment. *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* doesn't make use of the pixel and vertex shaders on the GeForce3, so the visuals will look about the same as with your current video card, but its vastly superior fill rate and memory bandwidth will let you crank up the texture detail and play at higher resolutions while keeping everything running smoothly. *Unreal II*, on the other hand, will be optimized to take advantage of the DirectX 8 features in the GeForce 3 and Radeon 8500 cards, so you'll probably see big increases in both speed and visual quality when stepping up from your current video card with that game.

Q: How much would I benefit from upgrading my standard soundcard, which came with my HP Pavilion 900MHz PIII, to say, the new SoundBlaster Audigy X-Gamer card? Would I notice a much better sound? My current card properly powers my subwoofer and speakers and is multi-channel so there is no problem, but would the new card give me a much better sound?

Also, what is the difference in speed between EIDE 5,400-7,500-10,000? What is the difference in speed between SCSI, Firewire, USB and EIDE? Do you have to buy a separate SCSI card to install SCSI drives?

"Humer8"

A: Unfortunately, sound is one of those areas where it's hard to say exactly what difference a user will notice when upgrading from one technology to another. There are a lot of variables to consider—the quality of your speakers, the games you play, the volume that you usually listen at, and the sensitivity of your hearing all play a role. Assuming you have pretty good hearing, good speakers, don't always have the sound turned down low, and play games that use quality audio samples (preferably with code to enable 3D sound), the Audigy will make quite a difference. It's a very clean-sounding card with almost no detectable noise in the signal, and of course does a good job with DirectSound 3D and EAX 3D sound technologies.

5,400, 7,200, and 10,000 are numbers referring to the spindle speed (often called rotational speed) of a hard drive. Basically, it's how many revolutions per minute the platters spin. The faster the speed, the faster the data moves under the head that reads and writes it, and the faster the drive. Now, some drives that spin slower are faster than those that spin faster, just because they pack more data on each platter. But as a general rule, the higher numbers are faster.

There isn't a whole lot of difference in speed between SCSI, Firewire, and IDE anymore. Each can support speeds faster than most hard drives, and the best way to speed up your drive is to get a faster drive, not a faster connection method. There are some advantages and disadvantages to each, but if you're just buying a new internal hard drive for your PC, stick with IDE. USB is far slower than any of those others—at least, USB 1.1 is. It can only handle 12 megabits a second, or a megabyte and a half. Most good new hard drives can steadily supply data at around 30 megabytes a second, and go even faster in short bursts. The new USB 2.0 standard is 40 times as fast as the old, and suitable for hard drives, though not better than IDE or SCSI for internal drives.

To answer you final question, yes, SCSI drives need their own separate controller. Some motherboards have SCSI controllers built-in, but it's pretty uncommon these days.

Q: I've read your articles about Windows XP, and while I think it's a nice improvement over Win98/Me/etc, there is one extremely important point that I think you need to stress to your readers: Windows XP only supports game controllers with a USB interface. This means that many users will be forced to buy new hardware if they upgrade to XP. For me, that meant that my perfectly good Microsoft SideWinder Force Feedback joystick that plugged into my game port is now a paperweight.

Greg S.

A: I'm glad you brought this up, because it's a common misunderstanding about Windows XP that it only works with USB game controllers—it just doesn't auto-detect standard gameport controllers like the old Windows 98/Me did. If you open up the game controllers control panel and add your joystick or gamepad manually, it should work fine. Some third-party controllers might need new drivers for Windows XP, but most of the common and popular ones work right "out of the box."

TECHBYTES

NVIDIA's next mobile chip – At the Fall Comdex this year, NVIDIA announced the details of their new upcoming mobile chip, code-named NV17M. The new mobile processor will fall somewhere between a GeForce 2 and GeForce 3 in capabilities. There is to be no pixel shader capability and limited vertex shader functions, so it's not quite a DirectX 8 part. As with the GeForce 2 Go, there are only two pixel pipelines. Still, NVIDIA has managed to achieve clock speeds of 250 MHz for both the core chip and the RAM, so you're looking at 500 megapixels and 8 GB/sec of bandwidth in the highest-performance configuration, which is excellent performance for a notebook chip. That's right, just as with the GeForce 2 Go, the NV17M will be available to notebook manufacturers in a variety of configurations, scaling through 32-bit, 64-bit, and 128-bit DDR RAM. What's more, they've managed to bind the RAM together with the chip into a single package a little larger than a quarter. They can bundle either 32 or 64 megabytes this way, and since both chip and RAM now take the same space and the chip alone previously did, it can be used in smaller and lighter notebooks.

Other innovations include power saving features in both hardware and software that scale back both CPU and graphics processing according to user-defined power settings and can even intelligently shut off the 3D rendering parts of the chip to save power when they're not in use. Dual-display support should be vastly improved with dual independent display controllers for LCD monitors, CRTs, and TVs. MPEG2 decoding hardware is improved as well, which should help offload work from the CPU and save battery life when watching The Matrix yet again on those long flights.

Toshiba will ship the first notebook with the chip in February, and others will follow soon. When we get our hands on a final production-quality model to test we'll give you the lowdown on how well it performs

The Terahertz transistor – Intel recently flaunted a new design for chip transistors that should allow them to run faster and cooler in the future. As chips get smaller and clock speeds increase, transistors flip on and off more times a second, and generate more heat. At the current rate of change, chips near the end of the decade would produce as much heat per square centimeter as the sun – if we could even feed them enough power. Intel's new transistor design comes in the form of three changes that reduce the heat transistors generate. Predictions indicate that the transistors will pave the way for chips by 2007 that contain about a billion transistors and operate at a terahertz (that's 1,000 gigahertz). By contrast, Intel's fastest Pentium 4 chips run at just over 2 GHz and contain 42 million transistors. Similar technologies are under way by other chip manufacturers, like IBM. ●

DOS Games, Meet Windows XP

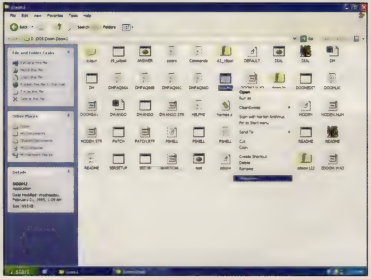
Can DOS games endure in a Windows XP world?

by Todd Brakke

When Microsoft released Windows XP in October, it marked the first consumer operating system birthed from the bowels of "The Beast of Redmond" that was not based, in any way, on legacy DOS code. For most users, this means a more stable and user-friendly operating system.

With Windows XP removing the last ties to a decaying DOS age, what hope is there for the old gaming coot looking for just one more adventure across Daventry in the original *King's Quest*? In a Windows XP world, are the doors to these moments of DOS gaming nostalgia officially closed? The answer to that question is a murky one. Perhaps it's that fuzzy math that's so popular with kids and presidents these days, but the best conclusion you can draw is: not necessarily.

In most cases, if a DOS game is going to work in Windows XP, you just need to install it and double-click its launch icon from inside My Computer. However, if the first shot out of the box doesn't work, don't hit the panic button just yet. Microsoft has provided several tools to help you get some—though not all—DOS games up and running.



Modifying a DOS shortcut is a simple matter of right-clicking the game's executable and selecting Properties.

Do you hear what I hear?

While other odd problems abound, configuring audio will be your most frequent source of migraines. It's the equivalent of throwing a snowball at a mountain and expecting it to cause an avalanche. Even if it actually works, the results are unpredictable. Since many DOS games treat music and sound effects as separate issues, this also leads to the PC equivalent of Double Jeopardy, since getting both to work properly at the same time is often the exception rather than the rule.

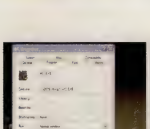
In a test system, which used a Soundblaster Live 5.1, most games either failed to properly identify the sound card, or if they did, the aural results were varied. For music, this is generally an all or nothing proposition. Various titles could play music properly using the General MIDI setting, or if available, MT-32/LAPC-1 (though sound quality is a factor with the latter). However, other titles (while using the same General MIDI/MT-32 option) failed to generate even one note. The picture for sound effects is even murkier. Some titles work just as they should, but for most the end result is likely to be no sound at all or something akin to a distant FM radio station: you can hear the audio, but it's full of noise and in some cases there is a noticeable degradation in game performance. Since audio is almost entirely dependant on how the game itself accesses the sound card, you'll be at the mercy of the options available in its setup program.

> "...if the first shot out of the box doesn't work, don't hit the panic button just yet. Microsoft has provided several tools to help you get some—though not all—DOS games up and running."

Managing your properties

If a DOS game doesn't launch properly when you double-click its executable, odds are its program window will open and close so quickly you can't even see its contents. Since you can't troubleshoot a program without seeing the error it's giving you, you need to access the MS-DOS shortcut for it so you can modify its run parameters. To do so, right-click the game's executable, choose Properties and disable the Close on Exit checkbox found on the Programs tab.

Once you've set this option, try opening your DOS game's executable again. This time the DOS window should remain open after the program bombs out, allowing you to see the error. Sometimes this error will be something that Windows XP can't get around. Other problems, however, are correctible. If it's a memory problem, usually having to do with not enough XMS or EMS memory, there's a simple fix.



Customize the location of your autoexec.nt and config.nt files using your DOS shortcut's Properties sheet. >>> Use the Memory tab of your DOS game's Properties sheet to set the type and amount of memory that your game can access.

D:\DOS\duke3d\SETUP.EXE
Duke Nukem 3D Setup Version 1.3D (c) 1996 3D Realms Entertainment
Sound Setup
Test Digital Sound Device

In Duke Nukem 3D you have to configure your audio and music options separately. Rare is the game in which both will function flawlessly.

Memory management purgatory

Since many DOS games required a lot of memory (for the time), and DOS could only maintain a base memory count of 640k (conventional memory), you had to use commands like HIMEM.SYS and EMM386.EXE to give your games use of extended and expanded memory. The problem was that even though games could make use of these higher memory areas, they also required a certain amount of conventional memory just to get going.

In Windows XP the issue of memory requirements more or less goes out the window (no pun intended). If a game is going to have memory problems, you'll typically get some form of no expanded/extended memory error when you double-click its executable.

To try to fix this problem, right-click the program's launch file and, once again, select Properties. This time, choose the Memory tab. On this tab are sections for configuring Conventional, Expanded, Extended, and Protected memory. By default, you should find that the drop-down list in the Total field of the Conventional memory area is set to Auto. This should ensure that you're never short on conventional memory when launching a DOS game. However, what you'll also find is that the drop-down lists for Expanded and Extended memory are set to None and 0, respectively. To keep all your bases covered, choose Auto for both of these options and click OK to close out of the Properties window.

```
REM             and leave the rests(if avai
REM             loadhigh and devicehigh co
REM             allocate all possible and
REM
REM     The EMM size is determined by
REM     with your application or _defa
REM     is zero, EMM will be disabled
REM
echoconfig
dosonly
dos=high, umb
device=%SystemRoot%\system32\himem.sys
emm=RAM
files=80
buffer=80
```

Add the emm=ram line to the config.nt file if your game needs expanded memory to run.

Now when you double-click your program's executable you should no longer experience any memory hassles. Hopefully this means that the program launches successfully and you can start playing. Just don't be surprised if you do little more than uncover other problems, such as the aforementioned audio troubles or some other, less-definable program crash. If this doesn't solve your memory problems, there's still one more trick worth trying.

AUTOEXEC.BAT and CONFIG.SYS

An important thing to understand about DOS compatibility in Windows XP is that the old config.sys and autoexec.bat files haven't completely gone away. They've just taken on new, secret identities. If you open My Computer and go to your Windows\System32 folder, you'll find these two stowaways masquerading as config.nt and autoexec.nt. Because you can set up as many individual config and autoexec files as you have a need for, and because it's safer than doing irreparable damage to the originals, copy these files into your DOS games directory before making changes to them.

To make a DOS game use a new set of config and autoexec files, right-click its executable file and choose Properties. This time, return to the Program tab and click the Advanced button. This opens a dialog box labeled Windows PIF Settings, which contains two fields: one for an autoexec filename and one for config. By default these two fields point to your %SystemRoot%\System32 directory, where SystemRoot

QuickTips for Running DOS Games

>> Keep the names of folder containing DOS games under nine characters, as DOS doesn't support long file names.

>> Windows XP cannot make DOS shortcuts from batch files or other non-executables. If your game runs from a CD and uses a batch file on the hard drive to launch, your configuration options (including memory management) are going to be very limited.

>> For clean audio, using General MIDI or your PC's internal speaker is your best bet. Even with a SoundBlaster card, choosing "SoundBlaster" seldom results in flawless functionality.

If you have the option, enable as few separate audio streams as possible (preferably just one). This helps avoid some of the slow-downs that occur in some titles (like *Doom II*) when using SoundBlaster for sound effects.

Typical audio card settings that most DOS games look for are address 220, IRQ 5 or 7, DMA 1 and Type 3 (SoundBlaster 2.0). This means the SET BLASTER command in your autoexec file should be: SET BLASTER=A220 I5 D1 T3. General MIDI support defaults to an address of 330.

How They Fared

A few DOS games under Windows XP

SUCCESSES

1-on-1: Jordan vs. Bird	
AD&D Goldbox Series	■
Ancient Art of War Series	▲
Bard's Tale Series	
Betrayal at Krondor	● ■ ▲
Beyond Zork	
Dark Forces	
Doom II	■ ●
Duke Nukem 3D	■ ● ▲
Dune II	■
Dungeon Hack	▲ ● ■
Elite Plus	■
Eye of the Beholder 3	▲ ● ■
Falcon 3.0	▲
Full Throttle	
King's Quest I-IV	
King's Quest V	■
King's Quest VI	
Leisure Suit Larry Series	▲
Monkey Island 2	▲
Pirates!	
Populous	●
Red Baron	■
Sam & Max Hit the Road	●
SimCity	
Space Quest 1-2	
Space Quest 3	▲
Space Quest 4-5	■
Terminator: Future Shock	■ ●
Test Drive 1-2	
Ultima I-V	▲
Ultima VI	●
WarCraft	
Wasteland	
Wing Commander I-II	▲
Wing Commander III-IV	
Wolfenstein 3D	
X-COM	
X-Wing	
Zork Series	
Zork Quest 1-2	▲

■ Use PC Speaker when there's a choice
▲ Requires the use of MoSlo or other utility
● Set Upended memory to Auto: on Properties sheet
■ Set Music to General MIDI or Roland LAPC-1, MT-32 or MPU401
▲ Add emm = RAM to config.nt
● Set Sound FX Card to PC Speaker or SoundBlaster
■ Set Screen resolution to 320x200
▲ Set Sound and Music to PC Speaker
● Set game to use no sound

FAILURES

Command and Conquer, Crusader: No Remorse and No Regret, Doom, The Elder Scrolls: Arena and Daggerfall, The Secret of Monkey Island, Privateer, System Shock, TIE Fighter, Ultima VII, Ultima VIII, Ultima Underworld I-II, WarCraft II

is the directory in which you installed Windows. You can change these fields to any valid drive path on your system. If you put copies of your config and autoexec files in a "DOS" directory on your primary hard drive then you would type c:\dos\autoexec.nt and c:\dos\config.nt in these two fields. If you find when playing a DOS game that its play speed is all out of whack, you can also trying enabling the Compatible Timer Hardware Emulation checkbox that appears beneath these two fields. More likely, though, you'll need an up to date version of a utility like MoSlo to peel some speed off your PC.

To get at the insides of config.nt or autoexec.nt you can use any word processing tool capable of opening text files (like Notepad). Unfortunately, while there is some tweaking you can attempt using these files, the impact of doing so is limited. Windows XP handles most of the configuration chores itself (including mouse support) and, as discussed earlier, you can use the game's Properties to configure memory usage. The big exception, though, is adding the command, "EMM = RAM" to your config.nt file. You will find that some titles require this option to be set before they'll recognize your expanded memory. If you're experiencing audio problems, you can also try to alternate settings for the existing SET BLASTER command. This command tells a DOS game at what address your audio card is located, which IRQ and DMA setting it uses and which type of card it is (the format for these settings and a list of SoundBlaster card types are included in the file). Really, the default settings should serve you as well as any you can make up. Trying various IRQ and DMA settings for DOS games with audio problems yielded no beneficial results.

More recent DOS games, like Ultima VI, often don't have an option for using your PC's Speaker. If SoundBlaster or a MIDI-based card don't work, you'll be playing in silence.

Does XP make a reliable DOS platform?

The irony of playing DOS games in Windows XP is that the older the game is, the more likely you are to succeed in getting it running. Titles that make use of your PC's internal speaker rather than an add-in sound card have a much better chance of booting up successfully. Titles that have very specific memory needs, or those that require the use of an add-in audio board stand a much lower chance of making the cut.

The only conclusion you can draw is that Windows XP is not the OS of choice for those few with a serious interest in playing DOS games. It's clear Microsoft tried to throw DOS gamers a bone with the configuration options, but their effectiveness is clearly limited. This is okay. Like it or not, it's no longer a DOS world, nor has it been for several years. Windows XP gamers who still want to tackle the post-apocalyptic deserts of *Wasteland* or take *Falcon 3.0* for the occasional test flight should consider dropping $50-$75 for an old 486 or first generation Pentium running DOS 6.x (try checking the classifieds of your local paper, a PC retread shop like Computer Renaissance, or EBay). If that's not an option, you can always try multi-booting your PC with both Windows XP and DOS operating systems or creating a DOS boot disk and hard drive partition. Failing that, it may be time to let your DOS games fade into the realm of sweet memory. After all, the Windows games of today aren't half bad either. ●

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Zombies! >>> Nazi paratroopers... you'll learn to hate these guys.

RATINGS

Extraordinary ★★★★★
Excellent ★★★★
Maybe ★★★
Mediocre ★★
Contemptible ★

Return to Castle Wolfenstein

World War II, comic book style

by Benjamin E. Sones

GENRE Shooter DEVELOPER Gray Matter Studios; Nerve Software [www.castlewolfenstein.com; www.nervesoftware.com] PUBLISHER Activision [www.activision.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 400, 128MB RAM, 3D Accelerator MULTIPLAYER 2-64 Players; Internet, LAN ESRB Mature

During one of the cut scenes in *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, one of your superior officers remarks, "Advanced weapons, biological engineering, robotics, and the occult... it all fits. I'm not sure into what, but it fits." You have to admire a game that knows where it stands.

Return to Castle Wolfenstein is loosely based on the great granddaddy of all first person shooters, *Wolfenstein 3D*, much in the same way that the Dodge Viper is loosely based on the Model T. *Wolf 3D*, in turn, was loosely based on *Castle Wolfenstein* and *Beyond Castle Wolfenstein*, a pair of top-down action/puzzle games from the 1980s. Aside from the name, these games share only one thing in common, but it's the single most compelling element in all of them. You kill Nazis.

Hitler's minions may well be the best game villains ever, and *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* plays them to the hilt. These aren't the real deal, but rather comic book caricatures, menacing goose-stepping sadists that dress in black (so that you don't forget that they're evil), worship the devil, and spend all their spare time polishing their weapons. You'll gun down hordes of them before the final credits roll, and in case that isn't enough the game also throws in zombies and a few uber-enemies that might have stepped right out of *Quake II*. It's like a Bad Guy reunion tour, and you play the gatecrasher.

Nazi zombies are no laughing matter

That gatecrasher is the completely characterless star of *Wolfenstein 3D*, U.S Army Ranger B.J Blazkowicz. You take your orders from the Office of Secret Actions (OSA), an organization so powerful that it can magically deliver written mission directives even in midst of covert operations in the heart of enemy territory.

The game comes with a story, but it's ultimately disposable. Cut scene interludes deliver most of it in snippets of melodramatic exposition that provide an excuse to send you to a variety of locales and pit you against a host of foes. It's tough to take it very seriously.

Fortunately the game beats you to that punch—it doesn't take itself very seriously, either, and it often pokes fun at its inadequacies. At one point you discover a memo from high command about the unusually high number of ladder-related fatalities among Nazi soldiers. Anyone that's ever tried to navigate a ladder in a *Quake*-based game (or in any shooter, for that matter) is sure to get a chuckle.

Shoot first, ask questions later

The game does good job hiding the fact that the core gameplay is essentially very simple—you kill all the bad guys. It throws a few superficial twists into the mix, such as stealth missions and missions where you are hunting for a specific object or information. In one mission you

get to steal a top-secret jet aircraft, in another you creep around a German village, assassinating key Schutzstaffel officers. At one point you have to escort a stolen tank through a bombed-out city, protecting it from hidden Panzergrenadier elements (for the record, this is easily the best mission in the game). The game spices up the environments with props cribbed from *Thief* and *No One Lives Forever*—intercepted notes and messages that offer insight into the mind of the enemy and the now familiar overheard conversations that are fast becoming a staple of the genre.

Make no mistake, however—this is no *NOLF*. None of the twists offer a dramatic departure from the basic run and gun formula. It uses mirrors and sleight of hand to make you forget that what you are really doing is moving through a completely linear environment shooting anything that moves (well… except civilians—that's a strict no-no), but that's what it boils down to. In an assassination mission you get a handy list of all the officers that you have to kill (the names, for the humor impaired, are straight out of *Hogan's Heroes*), but you can accomplish your goal with equal efficiency without even reading your briefing. Just kill everyone. The stealth missions don't require careful observation of enemy movements or precise timing; instead they merely require that you switch to your silenced weapons and mow down your opponents quickly, before they can trip an alarm. In the tank mission you have to make sure that the tank survives, but it's never really in much danger.

This is a uniform?

The spice of life, or a close facsimile

It feels as though the game is bursting with variety, however, and that's ultimately what matters. The developers keep the action rolling in an admirable fashion from start to finish. The levels are relatively short, and the game never keeps you doing quite the same thing for more than a level or two. Before you have a chance to grow tired of fighting Nazis in your escape from the castle, the game moves on to a very effectively presented horror sequence. Before the skeletons and zombies wear out their welcome, it's out of the crypts and on to a daylight stealth mission in the idyllic countryside.

It helps that the environments are constantly changing, and it helps even more that they are so beautifully rendered. If you have ever played a game powered by the *Quake III* engine, then you probably know what to expect. Suffice it to say that this is the best-looking *Quake* game yet.

It also helps that the combat is entertaining—that's something of a make or break feature in a game that focuses solely on killing things. You get the standard progression of weapons, from simple pistol to a souped-up version of the *Quake* lightning gun called the Tesla. You get the standard assortment of scripts that send the bad guys off in search of reinforcements or an alarm trigger. The AI is deviously good at taking cover when it knows it's outmatched, and enemy soldiers have a tendency to find a good place to hunker down and wait for you to try to fight your way past them. The only time the game misses a stride is at the very end, where you get a disappointingly typical boss fight. You know, the sort of tiresome challenge that god mode was invented for.

Das boot.

Overall, however, the game avoids the typical shooter "mid-game drag" and provides action that is consistently solid and fun.

Counter Counter-Strike

One area where the game breaks out of the mold is multiplayer. Instead of offering the typical assortment of deathmatch and capture the flag games, *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* delivers an original assortment of Axis vs. Allies team-based games that are, at least mechanically, every bit as much fun as *Counter-Strike* and *Team Fortress Classic*. You get to choose from an assortment of classes (Soldier, Engineer, Medic, and Lieutenant), each of which has useful and well-differentiated abilities. Depending on the map and the game mode that you choose, you get a variety of objectives that typically involve demolishing targets, capturing checkpoints, or snatching special items.

Teamwork is an absolute must, and this is both the game's strength and its weakness. If you can find a good group of people to play with, it's the most fun you can have with a mouse and a keyboard, but it doesn't take very many bad apples to spoil the experience. This game offers a few interesting tools to help diminish the effect of teamwork-impaired players, including an option to vote out team-killers and a unique system of timed "reinforcements" that strikes an excellent compromise between unlimited respawning and permanent death. It would be nice if the game cut the Gordian knot and simply defaulted the Friendly Fire option to "off" (most servers seem to leave it on), but hey—you can't have everything.

Only time will tell whether or not the multiplayer component of the game will hold up over time. Team-based games rely on their respective communities to help police players that are out to spoil the fun, and these sorts of communities either grow up around a game or they don't. *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* has all the right pieces to become an online classic, however.

One oddity is the fact that the multiplayer game shares very little in common with the solo game; probably because a different team developed each. Even the interface and the functionality of the weapons vary slightly between the two, which makes it somewhat jarring to switch from playing one to the other.

On the other hand, it's a bit like getting two good games in one box, so why complain?

UPSIDE	Killing Nazis, great pacing, best looking shooter on the market, killing Nazis, great multiplayer game, killing Nazis
DOWNSIDE	Solo game could be a bit deeper, some jarring differences between solo and multiplayer
RATING	★★★★½

Your posse. Word.

Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon

Rogue Spear, meet Delta Force

by Robert Mayer

GENRE Tactical Shooter DEVELOPER Red Storm Entertainment [www.redstorm.com] PUBLISHER Ubi Soft [www.ubisoft.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 450, 128MB RAM, 16MB 3D Accelerator MULTIPLAYER 2-36 Players; Internet, LAN ESRB Mature

Everyone wants to be a commando, but most of us don't have what it takes to actually become one. So, we crank up our PCs and immerse ourselves in the world of games like *Rogue Spear* or *Delta Force*, imagining that we're crack SEAL snipers or SAS troopers. Red Storm has made a career of sorts out of this Walter Mitty compulsion of ours, with the highly successful *Rainbow Six* and *Rogue Spear* line of counter-terrorist first-person shooters. Now they've mixed the squad-based gameplay of their earlier titles with a more straightforward military theme, offering more straight-up combat and less precision planning. The result is *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon*, a most curious beast indeed.

Essentially, the game is a real-world combat shooter that puts you in charge of a team of six loosely defined "special forces" troops from the US Army. You take on a single-player campaign of 15 missions, and you can build up the abilities of your team by earning points for successful missions. You can have three teams, and any one team can have no more than three members, giving you some flexibility. You can command them from an in-mission command map, or you can jump into any one of them and take direct control. The 15 solo missions run the gamut from rescuing prisoners to blowing stuff up, and take place in day and night and in all weather conditions across a wide variety of terrain.

Much of what makes up *Ghost Recon* is very well done, even superb. Graphically it is the best looking real-world shooter ever made, period. Within it's rather smallish 400x400-meter maps, the world detail is astounding, and the game's treatment of trees and foliage second to none. Weather and water effects, fog, and smoke are handled beautifully. The character models and animations are realistic and sophisticated, and the lighting is generally spot-on. And the audio in the game may be even better than the visual effects. Ambient sounds, weapon sounds, and voices are all wonderfully presented and appropriate, adding enormously to the game's appeal.

Also well done is the feel of the various real-world weapons, each of which has its own personality and idiosyncrasies. Only the curious lack of actual explosions from your demolition charges stands out as a missed opportunity here, as the rest of your kit—from light machine guns to silenced pistols—is a joy to use. Vehicles are generally good, but not outstanding. The high detail models used for armored vehicles are quite good, but the civilian cars, trucks, and buses are fairly bland. Overall, *Operation Flashpoint* does tanks significantly better, graphically, but then again, Red Storm's title isn't about tanks, either.

Incoming!

Because *Ghost Recon* is nearly unimpeachable aesthetically, its rough spots are all that more bedeviling. The missions, while varied, are wildly uneven in difficulty, and many are totally unsuited for the sort of unit that you're ostensibly commanding. While rescuing a downed aircrew makes sense, escorting an armored convoy, or assaulting a fortified mountain pass doesn't. The variety makes the game more interesting, true, but it also makes it very hard to really immerse yourself in the fiction,

A view of a city at war, from the gutter.

unlike more focused games like *Rogue Spear* or *SWAT 3*. Is your team a Special Forces outfit, or a light infantry unit? Depends on the day, it seems. Likewise, even when stealth is called for in the mission briefings, the best solution to every mission is usually to kill 'em all, because in most cases you have to slaughter the enemy anyway to accomplish your assigned tasks.

Most bizarre, though, is the way the game handles the multiple team members you command. The in-mission command map is a great idea, and works well enough, and the AI of your teammates, in general, is good. Depending on the rules of engagement you give them, they'll usually assume the correct posture and conduct themselves intelligently. Too often, though, you'll find them standing when they should be crouching, and the hard-wired formation logic sometimes has them refusing to

line up with cover and concealment they way you'd like. Some missions require everyone to be in a very small area for you to gain a victory, and that usually requires you to take control of each soldier individually and move them to the specified spot.

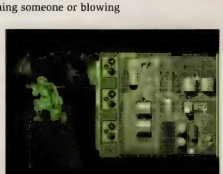
The ability to command each soldier directly adds a lot to the game, but also contributes to its lack of focus. For most of the you command one soldier until you need the special skills of another, park the first, and then bring up the specialist. Sure, you can simply tell the specialist's team to move to the target area, but that's a good way to lose people, and without experienced soldiers the later missions are brutally tough.

Beam me down, Scottski

Then there are the computer-controlled enemies, which are sometimes wonderful and sometimes infuriating. They move well enough, take cover, and lay down suppressive fire, but they also sometimes display a startling lack of situational awareness, standing right by you and ignoring repeated shots to their back and the backs of their buddies. Worse, many of them seem to be crack shots—even at night without night vision gear and with standard assault rifles they can rival or exceed the skills of your best snipers. The most frustrating thing about the enemy, however, is mostly a function of the game's mission design. Apparently, the Russian nationalists you fight have discovered teleportation, because the game makes extensive use of script-driven triggers to activate your foes. There's no such thing as clearing out an area or securing your egress route, because as soon as you hit the trigger, usually rescuing someone or blowing something up, the bad guys pop in instantaneously in predetermined locations. You can even, after seeing it happen a few times, position your own soldiers to "ambush" the teleporters, and in some cases the newly arrived enemies won't even notice you're there if you are even a pixel or two behind their cone of awareness.

The building textures and architecture is superb, even though you can't enter most of them.

Drawing a bead on a bad guy across the lovely Ghost Recon terrain.



Your planning map, at night. Most missions occur during bad weather or darkness.

Amazingly, the teleporting enemies, missions that pretty much require you to slaughter everyone you meet, and the sometimes bizarre behavior of your own team members still isn't enough to take the bloom entirely off this rose. *Ghost Recon* remains entertaining throughout the single player missions, especially if you don't take advantage of the many ways to "game" the system. Multiplayer games are truly a blast, even when you're playing with the typically moronic online pick-up game crowd. Finally, you get to see all those nifty character and weapon models up close, and while human teammates are often just as dumb as their AI counterparts, they're a lot more interesting. While Ubi.com, Ubi Soft's proprietary matching service, leaves a lot to be desired, direct IP connections or programs like All Seeing Eye make Internet play a snap.

single player missions, you can win handily by taking control of a single trooper, usually a sniper, and leaving the rest behind, bringing them up only when you need to access a particular specialist. The designers chose to limit your ability to outfit your soldiers to specific kits, and to limit which soldiers can use which weapons. This was, Red Storm has said, to make sure you don't use your troops as cannon fodder, but the result is often frustrating. In a mission where you'll be facing enemy tanks, for instance, you can't outfit most of your troopers with anti-tank rockets, because only the demolitions team members can carry those. If your rocket guy is killed, the mission is over, because you can't pick up weapons or equipment from the battlefield under any conditions. This leads to a sort of leapfrog approach to the game, where

On target

Even if your interests lie solely in the solo game, *Ghost Recon* is a must-have if you love tactical shooters. It's not perfect, and it's far from being "the most realistic tactical shooter on the planet," as the ads for the game claim. That honor probably goes to *Operation Flashpoint*, a very different game in many respects.

It is, however, extremely good-looking, great sounding, and very entertaining in both single and multiplayer fashion.

UPSIDE	Superb looks, good combat, spiffy multiplayer, excellent sound
DOWNSIDE	Problematic mission design, questionable AI, teleporting enemies
RATING	★★★½☆

Blood in the water as Lotus and Dragon battle in a river. >>> A force of clan Lotus warlocks lays an ambush in the forest.

Battle Realms

Old rice wine in new bottles?

by Nick McElveen

Kenji and his Dragon samurai attack a Lotus watchtower.

GENRE Real-time Strategy
DEVELOPER Liquid Entertainment [www.liquid.to]
PUBLISHER UbiSoft [www.ubisoft.com] REQUIREMENTS 400Mhz, 64MB RAM
MULTIPLAYER 2-8 Players; Internet, LAN ESRB Teen

It is tempting to dismiss *Battle Realms* as yet another 3D variation in a genre that has become increasingly worn out, and indeed, gamers who have truly tired of real time strategy will find little in *Battle Realms* to reinvigorate them. Yet the game has qualities that ought not be overlooked. Outstanding 3D graphics and unit animations combine with excellent music and sharp interfaces to create a compelling medieval Japanese setting filled with magic and mysticism. Four diverse playable sides, each with distinct units, structures, and abilities that defy intuitive understanding, ensure that you won't quickly master the game. Furthermore, the game takes a thoughtful new approach to unit creation. On the other side of the balance sheet, the quick pace of the game and the limited ability to control units in battle leaves little room for tactics, and once you master the game it offers little in the way of strategy as well.

Crouching Serpent, Resurgent Dragon

The setting for *Battle Realms* is a mythical oriental land once ruled by the men of the noble Dragon clan. Following an apocalyptic attack by a horde of dark creatures, the remnants of the Dragon clan form the evil Serpent clan, who vie for control with the necromantic Lotus clan and the brutish Wolf clan. Units of the revived Dragon clan resemble traditional medieval warriors, such as spearman, archers, and samurai, as well as whimsical artillery units with oversized bottle-rockets and handheld cannons. The Serpent clan is a more larcenous lot, with units such as bandits, raiders, crossbowmen and Ronin. Dragon and Serpent units and structures are roughly analogous, while the Lotus and Wolf—and their technology trees—are considerably different. Lotus units reflect their dark theocracy—blade acolytes, diseased ones, unclean ones, and warlocks—while the basic Wolf units reflect their brute strength and their close association with the forest and the earth—brawlers, maulers, berserkers, and druidesses.

Battle Realms offers two campaigns, both following the adventures of Kenji, heir to the throne of the Serpent Clan. Having fled the land following the murder of his father, Kenji faces a decision upon his return whether to pursue the path of good or evil. If you choose evil, Kenji seeks to restore Serpent clan control of the land in an approximately thirteen mission campaign, and if you choose good Kenji and his followers return to the ways of the Dragon clan in a campaign of equal length. The two campaigns feature limited branching, which offers some replayability. The Lotus and Wolf clans can only be controlled in multiplayer and skirmish modes.

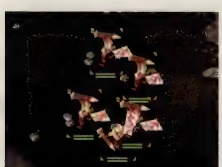
The yin and the yang of it

Battle Realms takes a somewhat novel approach to unit creation in that the specialized structures you build are used to train your combat units rather than actually generate them from scratch. All normal units start life as a peasant emerging from one of your peasant huts. As long as you have at least one peasant hut, peasants are created automatically, at a rate inversely proportional to the total number of units you have. If you have no units, new peasants are created almost instantly. If you have a number of units approaching the scenario maximum, new peasants take time to emerge. You can either send your peasants off to accomplish peasant tasks, such as gathering resources (water and rice) or constructing and repairing buildings, or you can send them to your military structures to be trained as military units.

Although the clans have very distinct looking military structures and units, each have

three basic types of military training structures that can train a peasant into a military unit. After sending a peasant to one of the structures, you can spend the resources and time to send your new unit to get more training at one of the other two basic structures to create a more powerful unit, or to all three of the basic structures to create a well-rounded unit. Mixing and matching this training allows you to create a wider variety of infantry, missile, and artillery units. Peasants can also round up wild horses for the stable structure, allowing you to put your units on horseback. Horses are not particularly hearty or plentiful, but as long as they last, their devastating trample can help turn the tide in battle.

Each clan also has two structures that military units can visit to equip themselves with battle-gear—special abilities that make your units much more effective. In addition, success in combat provides you with Yin or Yang points, with the good clans (Dragon and Wolf) earning Yang and evil clans (Serpent and Lotus) earning Yin. Yin and Yang points can be spent on upgrades to increase unit health, damage, range, and so forth. Collecting Yin and Yang points provides a strong incentive to win early battles and to avoid hanging back while others players duke it out in multiplayer games. One



One of the few truly defensive tactics: Serpent Cannoneers lay mines.

nice touch is that by setting rally points from your peasant huts in a chain through your various structures it is easy to create a diverse force of fully-trained warriors with little micromanagement on your part.

Fists of fury

Your primary leadership role is in building a well-rounded force imbued with all of the unit upgrades and special abilities possible, because when battle finally comes, it is fast and furious, and you'll feel more like an observer than a commander. Units drop at a rapid rate, and giving them specific orders is frustratingly difficult. Units have a mind of their own, and if they initially observe the letter of your orders, they care little for the spirit. For example, a single enemy unit will incite your forces to go running off haphazardly—a characteristic that the AI likes to exploit by running someone into your camp and then back into the woods—and if you haven't hot-keyed your units, you'll have a tough time rounding them up again before they get picked off and killed one by one. There are no formations available and no system of continuous patrols, though it is possible to queue a series of unit orders to create waypoints.

For the most part, the tactical AI is challenging, and if you haven't yet mastered the unit and battle-gear synergy of the clan you are playing—even if you've already mastered the game otherwise—you'll find yourself pressed to beat the computer even on easy level. The computer uses all available advantages—fighting from higher ground, hiding in the forest—and gives all of the orders you'd give if you could give orders fast enough. For example, it sends infantry to engage your ranged units hand-to-hand so they can't employ their more effective missile attacks, and it makes killing your medic units a priority. On the other hand, it is not uncommon at the end of single-player missions to find enemy peasants standing near their peasant hut, making no effort to rebuild or carry on.

Strategy shortfall

Single-player *Battle Realms* suffers from a decided lack of strategic options. There are few defensive tactics and the only defensive structures that you can build are watchtowers (and only up to three of those at a time). Resources play a superficial role because the two resources—rice and water—never run out, though you may have to assign an extra peasant to watering the rice. Thanks to poor strategic AI, the winning strategy is always the same. The enemy will generally attack your base with only half of its forces, which you then wipe out with all of your forces, earning Yin or Yang points in the process. Once this has repeated several times and you've gotten all of the available upgrades, you wait for the computer to attack with half its army once again, wipe it out, and then immediately rush the enemy base before it rebuilds its army.

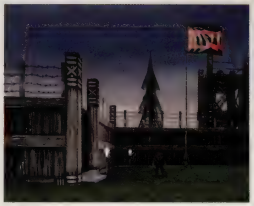
The Battle Realms equivalent of a super weapon: Dragon Samurai sacrifice themselves to activate the Dragon's Monument. >>> Dragon clan forces stand overlooking a waterfall.

The beautiful artistry and 3D graphics combine with the excellent music and sound combine to create an entertaining medieval Japanese setting, a colorized *Seven Samurai* with the magical realism of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. The individual unit animations are varied and well-done, from the Sumo wresters carrying cannons that salt the earth in front of them to the samurai that kneel and commit ritual suicide when their health has gotten too low, and additional touches such as waterfalls and wildlife only add to the atmosphere. The camera is fixed, though it is possible to pan in slightly.

Overall, *Battle Realms* is a highly polished effort that takes some interesting new approaches to unit creation and improvement. It is also a very challenging game that takes many hours to master and many more to complete. Unfortunately, by the time you are about two-thirds through your first campaign, you'll find that you really don't have a lot of room for creative strategy against a predictable (if difficult) computer opponent.

UPSIDE	A difficult game in which each playable side has a distinct learning curve
DOWNSIDE	Strategy choices and tactical control are limited
RATING	★★★½

The scenery that greets you at the start of your adventure.



You can't search while running!
You can't search while running!
You can't search while running!
You can't search while running!
Search mode OFF
Party takes Fellowship Pass

Statues are everywhere on Dominus. >>> Standing before the Umpani Base Camp.

Wizardry 8

Well worth the wait

by David Ryan Hunt

GENRE Role-playing PUBLISHER Sir-tech Canada Ltd. [www.sir-tech.com] DEVELOPER Sir-tech Canada Ltd. [www.sir-tech.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium 233, 64MB RAM, 8MB 3D accelerator HULTIPLAYER None ESRB Teen

After four years of development, and following a long struggle to find a publisher, *and* the virtual demise of Sir-tech, many wondered whether *Wizardry 8* would ever emerge. Even with no publisher or funding, the folks at Sir-tech didn't abandon their product. Perhaps they believed that they had a winner on their hands… and it's true, they do. It would have been a shame if *Wizardry 8* had fallen prey to a tremulous tide of publisher-development complications—that would have meant the loss of one of the best role-playing games of the year.

In the world of *Wizardry*, the Cosmic Lords created three artifacts of immense power and hid them throughout the galaxy. Alien races discovered two of these artifacts, and found maps contained within them. These maps led to Dominus, the first planet created by the Cosmic Lords. Along with the alien races, the Dark Savant and your small band of adventurers converged on Dominus where the third artifact disappeared. Whoever possessed all of these artifacts could ascend to the Cosmic Circle and gain the power of the Cosmic Lords.

En route to Dominus something shoots down your ship, leaving your party weakened and stranded on the shore near a monastery. Once you discover civilization, the conflict between factions develops based upon the choices that you make. Initially you play a minor role, but your influence grows as your party improves, eventually leading to alliances or obliterated factions. Since you know where the story is heading before you've even created a party, the plot is not based on a mystery but rather a tale that is gradually fleshed out as you gather background information about the characters and events that take place. It's not an intricate plot, but it gets the job done.

Questing for a dime

No role-playing game is complete without a hefty share of quests, and *Wizardry 8* offers them by the dozen. There is always something around the next corner that will improve your party. Most quests involve fighting your way through various monsters to reach your goal. Battles are challenging on any setting other than "novice," but you can change the difficulty setting at any time if you get stuck. Combat unfolds in rounds; you assign an action for each character and the turn plays out all at once. There's a continuous mode for combat, but it's essentially the same thing without the gaps between rounds and is best used during easy fights. The one advantage to continuous combat is the ability to change an order in the middle of the round, but often it is too late to make a difference.

Weapons are divided into three range groups. Short weapons can only strike opponents adjacent to you, while long-range weapons such as bows can attack from a distance. This is all standard fare; the real difference comes with extended weapons. Polearms and similar weapons have slightly longer reach. Your party formation is customizable so that up to three members can be in the front, sides, rear or middle. If you have more than three fighter types, they won't all be able to reach with short weapons. Equip them with extended range weapons and you can place them in the middle and sides. A properly structured party can attack from any position and defend your mage at the same time.

Creature feature

Monsters are plentiful, albeit not on the same scale as *Might & Magic*. Most fights involve six to twelve monsters. When too many enemies—or worse yet, allies—are involved in a fight, it takes an excessively long time. Your opponents take too long to move even at the maximum game speed, and sometimes they will be out of range and you'll have to hunt them down to end combat. Most combats are small enough to avoid this problem, but it does happen.

Powerful new creatures appear throughout the game, stretching your party's abilities to their limits. Boss-like battles are uncommon early on, but they appear with increased frequency once your party reaches a certain strength. Many of these fights consist of one major battle in miniature dungeons that yield a pile of treasure. Caves, burrows, waterfalls and buildings spread throughout the world are often the best place to find new stuff.

An unfortunate party meets its demise at the hands of a vastly superior foe.

Conquering the cosmos with swords and slings

One of the most enjoyable parts of the game lies in crafting and later developing your party. A maximum of eight characters can be in your party at any time—six that you create, and two that join later. Choosing characters is like shopping in a candy store; Rangers have searching abilities, Monks have all those melee attacks, and Bards have instruments. Before you know it, you have a list of nine or more characters, and it is necessary to trim down your selections.

The game offers a choice of eleven races and fifteen classes, everything from Psionics to Samurai to the usual Fighters and Rogues. There is enough variety to encourage you to go through the game a second time with a new party, even though the game takes a good 75-100 hours to complete. If you don't have the time to play through the game twice, your characters can change their class when they level. You can freely jump back and forth between classes, but the abilities that you can improve are restricted to the class that you are playing.

Selecting a voice is the final step in character creation. There are eighteen voices for each gender, characterized by personalities such as aggressive, eccentric, cunning and chaotic. Characters speak whenever something important happens, so before long you will become familiar with various events and can play by ear. Your ranger may shout, "There!" when he spots an object, or tell you when an illness passes. The voice acting is consistently good and similar to that in *Jagged Alliance 2*. Music and sound effects play a "behind the scenes" role throughout the game—there are no grand sweeping orchestras here. Overall the audio effects are well done and fit the mood of the game.

Key words for conversation topics are stored automatically, and you can type in any question that you want to ask.

Considering the game's age, the graphics are surprisingly clean and detailed… in most cases. Monsters and character models are consistently exceptional, and important structures are typically well crafted and pleasing to the eye. The generic terrain is another matter. When traveling across a stretch of land, the ground that you walk on does not look nearly as good as the monsters that you encounter. This is a relatively small issue; most of your time will be spent looking at the creatures and not the ground.

The grand scheme of "things"

While the game has its flaws, it doesn't have many. The automap takes too long to load, usually longer than it takes to load the actual area. Quest records in your journal do not provide any details, often leaving you fumbling if you have not been paying close attention. Don't worry—most of the time you will be having too much fun to notice.

Wizardry 8 is not likely to convert anyone that has never enjoyed dungeon crawl role-playing games, but it is a godsend for people that do, and for fans of the *Wizardry* series. There's plenty of character building, combat, exploration, and questing. There are monsters to kill and items to find. Skills get better after almost every fight, and the constant sense of improvement helps keep the game fun throughout. 2001 hasn't been a strong year for role-playing games, but *Wizardry 8* will keep you playing well into the New Year.

I want one of those in my inventory!

UPSIDE	Wide variety of characters to create, many monsters to kill and items to find, great classic role-playing game feel
DOWNSIDE	Automap takes longer to load than areas
RATING	★★★★½

The Sturmovik is one tough customer.

IL-2 Sturmovik

The Eastern Front Sets the Stage for the Luftwaffe and the VVS

by Leonard Hjalmarson

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

GENRE Simulation DEVELOPER 1C: Maddox Games [www.1c.ru] PUBLISHER Ubisoft [www.ubisoft.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium III 600 or better, 128MB RAM, 32MB 3D accelerator MULTIPLAYER 2-32 players; Internet, LAN ESRB Everyone

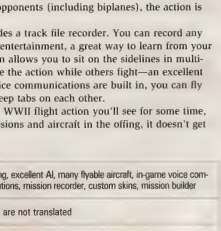
The Eastern Front sets the stage for *IL-2 Sturmovik*, a plane dubbed the "flying tank" by the soldiers it protected—the Germans referred to it as "Black Death." Its tough armor and huge numbers (over 36,000 built) made it the workhorse of the Soviet air effort. *IL-2 Sturmovik* the game is broad in scope, since it also includes flyable versions of the Me 109 and FW 190. And it's a simulation fan's dream that redefines the genre, or at least what's left of it. It has excellent physics in the flight, damage, and environment models combined with stunning graphics, and the total package is nothing short of revolutionary.

The research effort that went into the game is staggering, and it shows in the cockpit details as well as the variety of airframes. Eight types of the Sturmovik are flyable, as well as three LaGG-3s, three MiG-3s, the La-5FN, six types of Yak, three P-39s, five 109s, and the FW 190 A-4 and A-5. The fighting is set over terrain with detail rivaling Microsoft's *Flight Simulator 2002*. Maps include Smolensk, Moscow, Stalingrad, Berlin, the Kuban Peninsula, Kursk, and the Crimea. Ground objects look good, and cities and towns are well populated, including individual trees. Both summer and winter terrains are available. You'll need a pretty hardcore system to get all the bells and whistles, though. The 90-page manual is brief but adequate. The light gray printing may drive you crazy, but an Adobe PDF file contains the same information and makes for easier reading.

In the game, detail is a hallmark. Computer-controlled pilots turn their heads to track the enemy, clouds are stunning, a damaged fuel line drips while the plane is taxiing, oil stains smear the windshield of a damaged La-5, the sun glare blinds you as you turn to follow an Me 109, the chute of a strafed pilot collapses and he plummets to earth, tracers vary by color (as they did in real life), and watching a flight of 16 Ju-88s in a flak field is mind bending. Speaking of tracers, the armament variety is equally incredible. The MK 108 30mm cannon is available for the 109 G-6, and various types of rockets are available for the IL-2. How about the 5000 kg bomb for the Pe-8? The IL-2, like the Heinkel, can also carry torpedoes. Those are for the naval battles, of course. The ships in IL-2 are as stunning as the aircraft… and as deadly.

For the casual pilot, *IL-2 Sturmovik* also features a relaxed flight model. Options are legion: takeoffs and landings can be toggled on and off, and most of the flight parameters can be toned down for the novice or the player can choose to be invulnerable. Icons can be used to identify bandits, or you can turn them off. There are three game modes: single-player, campaign, and online. Online modes include dogfight, team play, and cooperative. The cooperative mode allows complex missions with sixteen human pilots as well as computer-controlled pilots. Moreover, you can mount custom paint schemes in online play.

The campaign is divided into six historical "chapters," tracking your career from the steppes of Russia in 1941, to the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin in 1945. Combat includes air support, ground attacks and naval battles. Choose the IL-2 and you can fly as pilot or gunner. The included mission editor allows you to create your own custom missions and campaigns.



This 109 has taken serious damage.

You'll be hard-pressed to find better AI in any other flight sim past or present, and you can't tell the difference between humans and the computer when flying online. It uses flaps, clouds, the sun, and any other advantage it can find to take you out. With a huge variety of opponents (including biplanes), the action is fast and furious.

The game even includes a track file recorder. You can record any offline mission for later entertainment, a great way to learn from your mistakes. The game even allows you to sit on the sidelines in multiplayer mode and observe the action while others fight—an excellent training mode. Since voice communications are built in, you can fly with your friends and keep tabs on each other.

This is likely the best WWII flight action you'll see for some time, and with user made missions and aircraft in the offing, it doesn't get any better than this.

UPSIDE	Stunning, excellent AI, many flyable aircraft, in-game voice communications, mission recorder, custom skins, mission builder
DOWNSIDE	Voices are not translated
RATING	★★★★★

Motor City Online

Not so super Chevy weekend

by David J. Long

GENRE Online Racing PUBLISHER Electronic Arts [www.eagames.com]
DEVELOPER Electronic Arts [www.eagames.com]
REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 350, 64MB RAM, 3D Accelerator, Internet connection
MULTIPLAYER Online only ESRB Everyone

Motor City Online sounds great on paper. Give players a selection of cars from the 1930s through the 1970s, the famed muscle car era of American motoring. Create an economy where they earn a weekly salary based on their level. Let them buy and sell cars and parts with the money they earn. Get them racing to improve earnings and enhance their cars and throw in bragging rights through participation in a forced community of car clubs. That should be all that's needed for a hit game, right? It doesn't work.

"Race against thousands over the Internet" is the tag line for Electronic Arts' latest online-only PC game. But it's a misleading one, since you only race against four of those thousands at any one time. Most of those thousands race on the same track again and again to quickly save up money for a rare car. To cap it off, once they get one they don't want to race it against anyone. It's all about status. Call the game *Get Car Stuff* instead.

Everything happens online—you cannot start a single player race with AI—and the technical implementation is sound. Lag is minimal on a modern connection. The game sports a keen interface that uses Internet browser technology to its fullest with 3D objects such as your current car and persona interspersed on screens that are essentially web pages. It's easy to get around using hyperlinks. Info ranging from your current car and parts to car auctions and club happenings are only a few clicks away.

You create a persona to represent you from plenty of choices that fit the periods well, but it's just for show. You never have an opportunity to look at the people. One feature touted long ago was the ability to cruise the city to meet and race others. None of that exists in the final game. You simply click pull-down menus and hop between chat rooms. For most players, chatting is secondary to simply clicking on another link to a race. This is about as impersonal as it gets in an online-only game.

Once you are in a race, you'll find graphics that haven't come far since *Need for Speed: High Stakes*. They're solid and fast, but lack "oomph." The circuit layouts are similarly boring. At least there is a reasonable and entertaining driving model. Only a few racing venues are available to you from the start and higher levels give you access to more. Most of the time, everyone races sponsored events that use better cars than the stock clunker you start with. It costs you nothing to enter sponsored races and you don't have to pay when you wreck the car, so it's pretty obvious why everyone goes this route: free money with no risk. In addition, most everyone only races ovals. Trying to convince other players to drive a street circuit is like pulling teeth.

Circuits can be a drag, but Drag Racing is vibrant. Cars sometimes get wagered on the quarter mile where you'll find many more races with player-built hot rods. Eventually, drag racing gets dull not only because of its straight-line action, but also because you don't work on setups for your car. You simply change parts for better performance.

The game emphasizes purchasing and upgrading your cars, with auctions as the primary method of obtaining performance parts. Many game sessions feel like an extended Ebay visit with no search function. Prices skyrocket even on marginal parts, and you need to be a car maniac to know what's worthwhile. Auctions are skewed by a wacko economy where rare cars and parts are trickled out by the developers. This is nothing like the real world, where new cars are produced in droves. You'll fall over when you see that a Mustang sells for $250,000.

Taking a Sunday drive in the Plymouth. >>> Get used to this view, it's all anyone does.

While it functions properly, *Motor City Online* simply doesn't have anything that makes it worthwhile as an online game. It's not worth ten dollars per month and even that first month isn't worth the entry price. All of the things that make it "online" add up to fluff. You're better off with the last *Need for Speed* game and a few friends you can hook up with. As a bonus, you won't have to deal with people named AZZ KIKR throwing around f-bombs either.

UPSIDE	Cool time period and cars, online racing-even in a bad game-is always fun
DOWNSIDE	Only four players per race, lousy incentives, people rarely race anywhere but the ovals, no paint kit or body customization
RATING	★★

Comanche 4

Blowing stuff up 101

by Tom Chick

See what happens if you don't yield for the President of Italy's limo?

GENRE Action-y Flight Sim DEVELOPER Novalogic [www.novalogic.com] PUBLISHER Novalogic [www.novalogic.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 450, 128MB RAM, 3D Accelerator MULTIPLAYER 2-16 Players; LAN (Internet pending) ESRB Teen

From Comanche to Tachyon, Novalogic has modeled Boeing-Sikorsky's RAH-66 Comanche, Lockheed Martin's F-22 Raptor, General Dynamics' F-16 Falcon, Russia's MiG-29 Fulcrum, and GalSpan's Orion space fighter with the same respect for realism and authenticity. Now they're back where it all began with the fourth installment in the series of Comanche games that began in 1992. It's "AirQuake" all over again, but this time Novalogic is making no bones about their arcade bent. There are no claims of realism on the box, which avoids the word "sim" entirely, calling Comanche 4 a shooter in the sky and a helicopter action game with a five-minute learning curve.

How refreshingly candid that the default controls are straight out of a first person shooter. WASD to move, space bar to jump (or, in this case, pop up over the terrain), 1-5 to select weapons, and mouselook to aim by pointing the helicopter fuselage, sans inertia or weight. Novalogic lets you add a few layers of complexity over the interface, but it won't change the fact that you're controlling what looks like a helicopter but moves like an air hockey puck, skittering across the world on a slick invisible pillow.

Combat is right click to target, left click to shoot. This little one-two finger dance takes up about half of the learning curve. The other two and a half minutes are spent figuring out which weapons are best for which situations, although there's really no point fussing too much over this. They bear only a passing resemblance to their real world counterparts, but no matter. This isn't about simulating things. The cannon fires quickly but does minimal damage; the Hellfires are really slooooow, but they arc over obstacles; the Stingers are little firecracker hornets with tight homing; and the rockets are the best all around compromise.

Each mission is a thinly veiled excuse for lots of things to blow up, either because you shot at it or someone else shot at it. *Comanche 4* offers a lot of situations in which you're not necessarily the center of attention. Since you don't always have to do all the work, this is a much more cinematic game than the typical You vs. The World action game. In one of the better missions, which demonstrates nicely just how much this engine can do, you're providing air cover for the President of Italy's limo and its armored escorts as they make their way through an embattled city to get to the airport. This scenario was supposed to have involved a President of the United States but was superficially reworked after September 11th. The Italian President's security agents, Warner and Clark, who are dressed like members of the Secret Service, guide you through the city. That must be Luigi Warner and Giuseppe Clark. A stripped down model of Air Force One, presumably a hand-me-down from the U.S., meets them at the airport.

The real star here is the new graphics engine, which does a superlative job with water, foliage, explosions, smoke, natural terrain, and destruction animations. In fact, with so much attention on the graphics and so little meat in the gameplay, there are times this feels more like a tech demo than a full game. It doesn't help that *Comanche 4* has the kind of rough edges you'd expect from a game prematurely kicked out the door to be on the shelves in time for the post-Thanksgiving shopping rush. There's no way of knowing whether this happened with *Comanche 4*, but it might explain the glitches on various video cards and the incomplete multiplayer support. Almost a month after it's been finished, there's still no way to play over the Internet. Even over a LAN, multiplayer games modes are anemic. Deathmatches get dull with Comanche's point and click dynamic. However, playing the unlocked single player missions with a human wingman does offer a quick thrill.

Comanche 4 is really just a high tech shooting gallery with detailed destruction animations and burning trees instead of mechanical ducks. It appeals to a man's primal (well, juvenile, at any rate) need to blow stuff up, that part of the pre-adolescent male psyche that puts fireworks in model airplanes, melts GI Joes, and burns down popsicle stick cabins. As such, it's a spectacle and a success, even if it is a bit wanting as a game.

Exxon Valdez captain Joseph Hazelwood pulls into the shipyard.

UPSIDE	Fantastic explosions, water, foliage, and terrain
DOWNSIDE	So-so gameplay
RATING	★★★½

Good thing the Alliance didn't think of stairs. >>>The army's dead but at least the shield generator's working fine. >>> "Sure, Chewie, I respect that the tree-bark is sacred but I don't care how absorbent he is, that's no way to treat an Ewok ambassador. Now take him out."

Star Wars Galactic Battlegrounds

Attack of the clones

by Kelly Wand

GENRE Real-time Strategy DEVELOPER LucasArts [www.lucasarts.com]
PUBLISHER LucasArts [www.lucasarts.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 233, 32MB RAM ESRB Teen

Calling Star Wars Galactic Battlegrounds the best *Star Wars* real-time strategy game to date is something of a backhanded compliment, akin to saying Jake Lloyd was the best child actor in *The Phantom Menace*. You can't fault them for false advertising: it's *Age of Kings* with *Star Wars* units, period, the end. You have the option of playing as one of six factions from the movies: the Rebel Alliance, the Galactic Empire, the Wookies, the Gungans, the Trade Federation, or the citizens of Naboo, each of which comes with its own unique unit and set of advantages and disadvantages.

Building up is pretty much the same. You spend a good five to ten minutes hyper-organizing the orderly, continuous influx of four resources—food, carbon (aka wood), bright green nova crystals (gold), and purple ore (stone, and which looks more crystalline than the nova crystals). Food is still the mainstay. You hunt and fish and build farms exactly as you did in the parent game, all by hand (Gungans and Wookies apparently have similar diets). You eventually produce Jedi Masters in the same humble fashion. Among the additions are structures called power cores, which function a bit like Protoss pylons. Without one nearby, most of your structures perform at 25% efficiency. You can also make shield generators that protect any structures and units within its nimbus; the Gungans enjoy the benefit of a mobile generator like that in *Episode I*, although the one in the game is carried on the back of a skittish dinosaur that will frequently move out of position unless ordered to stand ground.

Star Wars fans who have never played *Age of Kings* (shame on them) will probably find the translated concepts of evolving "tech levels" and building a monument that will bring you instant victory if it stands for 200 days (yes, days—the *Star Wars* universe is fast-paced) more interesting and inventive than *Age of Kings* veterans will, though they may be puzzled by how fragile the air units are or by why so much of the terrain looks earthly and pastoral. The graphics are rather retro for a 2D *Star Wars* game, and the art doesn't quite live up to Ensemble standards.

Sometimes the fusion of styles actually works. Imperial walkers look right at home cresting Kashyyk's verdant hills and the pink bulbous Gungan structures and ornate cannons stand out as genuinely exotic (the Empire's buildings, by contrast, are difficult to distinguish). The sound effects, especially the plethora of agonized metallic warblings, are all spot on.

Shotgun weddings inspire rocky marriages, however. All the factions—even Gungans and Wookies—are able to construct a Jedi/Sith Temple and create Jedi Knights and Masters. Like priests, these units fight and convert enemy units to your color, but they also seem to crumble just as fast as upgraded regular infantry, especially when confronted with their specially designed counter-unit, bounty hunters. As Jar Jar would say, "Ex-squeeze me?" Their flickering little blue lightsabers (yeah, all blue) never even deflect bolts of incoming fire. Air units are similarly less powerful than you might expect.

The AI doesn't appear to have been imported intact. Unlike cavalry, the mounted troopers in *Galactic Battlegrounds* go after enemy buildings instead of units that are actually shooting them, and continue to vandalize while they're being repeatedly hacked and shot, even when set to "aggressive."

They may look like Jawas but wait'll you see em fight.

The single-player campaigns are pretty standard quest/maze/time-limit stuff, but some are fairly challenging and they cover a broad range of *Star Wars* events, from a Gungan civil war hundreds of years B.J.J. (before Jar Jar) to helping Han Solo and Chewbacca fight their way off the embattled Wookie home world following the destruction of the second Death Star. In one you also have the privilege of controlling Darth Vader right after the Battle of Yavin; his lines are amusingly cranky.

There are flickers of life in *Galactic Battlegrounds* that suggest the designers may have been on the right track. There is no shame in borrowing from great source material; one thing that makes the *Star Wars* movies so great is how successfully they borrowed the trappings of classical myth-cycles and old war movies. But hamstringing Jedi and spaceships to accommodate a medieval, land-based combat system was the easy way out—a capitulation. The *Star Wars* movies have always been first and foremost about the coolness of velocity. The *Star Wars* real-time strategy games are more about financing farming upgrades. That, more than anything, is why they fail.

UPSIDE	It'll take you back
DOWNSIDE	Way back
RATING	★★★½☆

Europa Universalis II

Back to the past

by Tom Chick

GENRE Strategy DEVELOPER Paradox Entertainment [www.paradoxplaza.com] PUBLISHER Strategy First [www.strategyfirst.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 233, 64MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-8 Players; LAN, Internet ESRB Everyone

Looking at screenshots of *Europa Universalis II*, you're probably wondering how different it is from the first game. It certainly doesn't look different, and the core gameplay is identical. It's still essentially the same enormous history sim, with breadth, depth, and longevity, with detail, grandeur, and elegant abstraction. Take the scepter of the country of your choice and guide her through war, commerce, and diplomacy. It's just like it was in the first game. No one reinvented the wheel here; they just reworked the occasional odd spoke, greased the axle, and gave it a realignment. Although there are a lot of changes—some small, some big, some nearly imperceptible—most of them come down to giving you more options.

The best example of this is the new domestic policy screen. This is a series of sliders, each poised between diametrically opposed concepts like freedom and serfdom, narrow-mindedness and innovation, or land-based and naval power. Once every ten years, you can shake up your country by scooting one slider one notch in the direction of your choice and immediately enjoying new bonuses and penalties. Over time, you can sculpt the society of your choice. This is a nice counterbalance to the new historical and random events that pop up, hitting you unawares with sometimes significant changes. Many of these give you a choice of reactions, often involving how you react to historical personalities, with the consequences meticulously detailed via *Europa Universalis'* tool tips. These are fine touches of insta-role-playing that fits perfectly into the strategic and historical contexts.

New missionaries can convert dissenting provinces to your state religion. A new model for cultural groups adds the concept of ethnicity, with the option to let troublesome minorities splinter off into vassal states, nominally granting them independence. These changes give you more flexibility in dealing with potential revolts. The wider time span—the game begins 100 years earlier and ends 50 years later—gives you more options as well. Start whenever you want and play longer. Although most of the scenarios are simply carried over from the first game, you can choose to play any nation in the game, giving *Europa Universalis II* an almost absurd amount of replayability. Who'll ever need a sequel when a game has legs this long?

Diplomacy has a wider range of choices now, including the option to grant military passage. This gives you more flexibility during war than the first game, in which you could only move through another country if they were allied with you against your opponent. Trade is more flexible now that you can agree not to compete with other counties' merchants. There are more kinds of relationships between countries. There are more options for the post-war peace settlements that determine the shape of the world. For instance, rather than annexing a conquered country, force it into vassalization to avoid the international scorn of a ruthless conqueror. These are the sorts of changes that seem minor if you're not familiar with *Europa Universalis*, but they have far-reaching implications by giving you more ways to play the game.

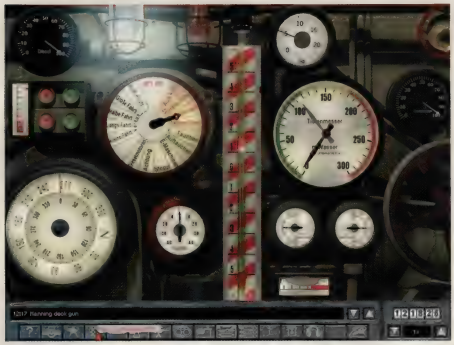
Choices, choices. >>> Some of the tea in China.

Then there are a few much-needed interface tweaks, the most important having to do with naval management. *Europa Universalis II* runs in higher resolutions. The music is better. The manual is still missing an index. There are some nasty crash problems that would be infinitely more painful if it weren't for the robust auto-save.

One of the results of all the additional options is that *Europa Universalis* isn't as straight jacketed by history as it used to be. You'll see more fantastic outcomes like France getting swallowed by her neighbors, Byzantium beating back the Turks, England knocked out of the seas, or Poland biting off swathes of Russia. *Europa Universalis* goes to new places it couldn't reach before.

But this is one of those uncomfortable situations in which a Roman numeral is appended to a great game, but you can't help but wonder if it belongs there. There's really nothing here that shouldn't have been in the first game, and there's probably not enough here to keep fans of the first game from feeling slightly gypped. There's no denying *Europa Universalis II* is every bit as good as its predecessor, if not ultimately a bit too similar.

UPSIDE	New flexibility lets the game go places it didn't go before
DOWNSIDE	Didn't I play this game less than a year ago?
RATING	★★★★



A gadgeteer's dream.

The damage control screen.

Silent Hunter II

A slightly leaky boat

by Scott Udell

GENRE Simulation DEVELOPER Ultimation [www.ultimation.com] PUBLISHER Ubisoft [www.ubisoft.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 266, 64 MB RAM MULTIPLAYER None (requires Destroyer Command) ESRB Not Rated

After years in construction, *Silent Hunter II* has launched from its development slip into the simulated seas. While virtual submariners are likely to be thrilled no matter what, the shakedown cruise does reveal some unfortunate leaks.

The German/Atlantic follow-on to *Silent Hunter*, SSI's American/Pacific World War II submarine simulation, this second game covers much the same territory as Dynamix's *Aces of the Deep*. You'll command a variety of German *U-boots* across the length of the war, from the opening shots in September '39 into the waning days in 1945. You'll also cruise in a surprisingly wide variety of seas, from the expected coastal areas of Europe and England on as far as the Indian Ocean. Representing what submarines do is the key to any sub sim, and here is where you find *Silent Hunter II*'s first—and perhaps most serious—leak. You're only given a handful of stand-alone scenarios. Some of these (like the "Drumbeat" scenario) are quite fun, but others send you after specific targets and, should you miss that target, you might as well quit the scenario, as there's nothing else to do. There is a random mission generator, but you pretty much set all the conditions beforehand so you'll know almost exactly what you'll be facing. There is no scenario designer (another leak), although fans have already put out instructions on how to make your own scenarios by editing text files (visit www.subsim.com).

What, then, of the campaign? Frankly, it's another disappointment. Developer Ultimation never said that they were making a dynamic campaign, but they did promise that there would be plenty of variety within the missions... and there's not. Also, all the missions are canned—there are no random missions thrown into the mix. If you fail the main objective of the mission, you get to repeat it again and again until you complete it.

Other leaks? When you're moving by waypoints on your chart you'll find (usually after you run aground) that your sub doesn't actually go to its waypoint before turning, but starts a good half-kilometer or more before hand. Even at the highest difficulty levels the game gives you more intel on the enemy than you should have. The AI sometimes does a good job of driving enemy vessels up onto the shore, or not responding to your presence. Not a leak but rather irksome condensation is the fact that there's no way to adjust what triggers a change in your speed setting: an unseen enemy airplane will drop your clock to 4X speed (something the hardcore don't want, as it provides unfair intel), but an important radio message can come in and you blast past it at 2048X speed.

When you actually get into a mission you can have a lot of fun, particularly in the missions that are more open-ended hunts. In addition to the fixed control screens Ultimation has implemented wonderful pop-out controls that slide out from the side of your screen, allowing you to access basic sets of the important controls from any screen. You can even "pin" these into place, letting you leave up the torpedo controls while looking through the periscope.

The graphics on these screens are clean and crisp, although at the lowest resolution things get a tad crowded (the max resolution looks better). The external graphics are very nice if not as showy as they could be, although surprisingly the game does make use of the extra environmental features of a GeForce3 card.

What, then, of gameplay itself? Once you're in a mission you'll usually find a lot of fun, and good atmosphere. The tension is definitely there, especially in the missions where the designers put a lot of stuff on, in, and above the oceans. Beginning simulated submariners will face frustration in the campaign when they have to do things over and over again just to get to something new and different, and advanced gamers will be disappointed at how quickly they experience most of what the game has to offer. Somewhere in between is a decent, if not groundbreaking, game.

UPSIDE	Captures that "sub sim feel"
DOWNSIDE	Not enough scenarios, campaign is weak, some glitches
RATING	★★★

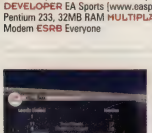
Dacourt spends his spare time as an alien from the planet Groktok. >>> Point blank for Nigeria. >>> The team stats are still pretty basic.

FIFA 2002

When EA says "qualify," believe it

by William Abner

GENRE Sports PUBLISHER EA Sports [www.easports.com] DEVELOPER EA Sports [www.easports.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium 233, 32MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-8 Players; Internet, LAN, Modem ESRB Everyone



Winter is upon us and that means, among other things, another *FIFA* game from EA Sports. The big hullabaloo about this year's edition is the new passing model. The central criticism of the series is that games degenerate into pinball passing fests that ruin the experience for those looking for a semi-realistic brand of soccer. The new model does not completely rectify this problem—long passes are still comically accurate—but it helps lessen the pinball effect and short passes take more patience than ever before.

The new system allows you to instruct a teammate to make a run down the pitch, hopefully opening up the defense and creating more space or possibly a breakaway. Also new is a "give and go" button that encourages more team play. Passes are now intercepted with a bit more frequency, and "through-passing" works a bit better as well. A passing strength indicator makes it much easier to determine how hard a pass or shot will be before launch. The biggest problem is the alien physics model. The ball does a lot of weird stuff, such as changing speeds several times in mid-air or swerving to ensure that a pass hits its target. It all feels scripted.

Speaking of scripts, John Motson's play-by-play commentary remains the best in the business. He and Andy Gray keep things interesting and while the speech is repetitive after a few games the call of the games themselves is extremely accurate and entertaining.

Referee awareness is retooled to the point of sanity. No longer can you tackle a guy with impunity; a slide tackle from behind is an almost guaranteed free kick. Tackling is also a more risky proposition, and it forces you make better decisions on when to attempt a hard tackle.

As per norm with the *FIFA* series, you get a smorgasbord of teams and leagues. From Korea to the MLS, just about every major league is represented, along with over 75 National teams. What's less impressive is the fact that EA Sports fails to include the World Cup. Right on the box it says, "Road to the 2002 World Cup. Qualify for the biggest sports event in the universe." The word *qualify* cannot be stressed enough. If you take England, for example, and earn a spot during the qualification process, the game saves your progress and unlocks a secret tournament, such as the Asian Cup, but you don't get to continue on to play in the World Cup itself. The fact that the game saves your progress leads one to believe that EA has plans to release a World Cup edition at some point in the future. It's technically not false advertising, but it's awfully misleading, and it's a crime that the biggest National event in the entire sport (and arguably the entire sporting world) is not represented in the game. There's nothing stopping you from creating custom knockout or league tourneys, but it's just not the same.

Fans hoping for more off the pitch strategy are left out in the proverbial cold, too. There's still no trade AI of any kind nor is there a multi-season mode. No need to worry about players leaving for other squads or anything of that nature, and swapping players from team to team is as easy as a mouse click. Stat tracking remains untouched from previous versions. All you get are bookings and goals. That's it. Important stats such as tackles, headers, and passing are absent.

The graphics are solid, as you'd expect. The pitch detail is superb and the player models refined. The player faces when viewed up close look weird, but the in-game graphics are top notch. Another quibble is that it takes a lot of horsepower to maximize the details, and if you try to play using the basic system requirements, the game slugs along like a wet snail.

While it's undeniable that *FIFA 2002* is an improvement over *2001*, it's less clear if it's worth spending another $45. New passing and tackling models are nice, but soccer fans deserve the same features—career mode, AI sliders, computer trade AI, detailed stat tracking, and so on—that nearly every other EA Sports game possesses..

UPSIDE	New passing model is slick, play-by-play is top notch, decent AI, custom league and team creator is a good addition
DOWNSIDE	No World Cup, no trade AI or career play, weak stats, poor rosters, contrived player rating system, only five stadiums, CPU refuses to sub players, no World Cup
RATING	★★★

(left) Ah, the old FASA interactive office that seems to be in every MechWarrior game. >>> Combat is just as fast and brutal as ever.

MechWarrior 4: Black Knight

"I'm invincible!" Well, maybe simply "formidable" will do

by Robert Mayer

GENRE Giant Robot Sim **DEVELOPER** Cyberlore [www.cyberlore.com] **PUBLISHER** Microsoft [www.microsoft.com] **REQUIREMENTS** MechWarrior 4 **MULTIPLAYER** 2-16 Players; Internet, LAN **ESRB** Mature

In the BattleTech universe, the inner sphere is teetering on the brink of civil war between the Davionists and the Steiner faithful. In *MechWarrior 4: Vengeance*, you took a stand for House Davion, when as Ian Dresari you retook Kentares IV from Steiner occupiers and reinstated your family's rule. Depending on your choices, you either took the throne yourself, or let your sister rule as Duchess while you returned to 'Mech piloting.

Enter *Black Knight*. The game presumes you took the throne for yourself in *Vengeance*, and that your closest advisors parted ways with you over your failure to save your sister and your lust for power. In the add-on, you play a disgraced Davion 'Mech pilot who enlists in the notorious Black Knight Legion, a mercenary regiment known for its single-minded pursuit of victory… and profit. Your first group of missions takes place on a barren moon, where you root out a nest of pirates. Soon you're drawn into the unrest on Kentares IV again, this time supporting the rebels against Ian's rule. Yep, the guy that you played in the original game is now your foe. It adds a bit of spice to the game.

The tone of *Black Knight* is noticeably grimmer than that of *Vengeance*. There, you felt, well, *noble*, leading your house to recover what Steiner wrongfully took. Here, you're a paid soldier—a paid killer, really. In one mission, you are sent to assassinate one of Ian's lieutenants, Casey, who was one of your lancemates in the original game. In another, you have to kill Ian himself, purely for revenge. Late in the game, one mission has you launching ICBM-type missiles at cities, also in revenge, and the game culminates in a pure revenge killing. In many ways, there is more vengeance here than in *MechWarrior 4* itself. It fits the nature of the Black Knight Legion, as a battle-hardened mercenary outfit, but it's a little disturbing.

There are 23 missions in the expansion, and they're mostly well designed. They're also very challenging, so that if you played *Vengeance* on Regular difficulty you should definitely play this one on Recruit, unless you relish a lot of repetition. Using the MechLab is essential, too, as many missions virtually require custom-built 'Mechs. One flaw in *Black Knight* is that too many of the missions have "tricks" that you need to learn, whether a specific 'Mech configuration or a certain path through the way-points. The voice-over briefings and in-engine cut scenes, while essential and excellently done, too often leave out crucial information, forcing unnecessary replays. And a few of the missions are very long or have "gotchas" at the end, which can lead to unwanted frustration.

Luckily, the frustrations can't outweigh the sheer fun of this expansion pack. Forget the five new 'Mechs; they're fine, but only the Sunder is really useful. The new weapons—X Pulse Lasers, the Inner Sphere's answer to Clan tech—are nifty enough, but hardly revolutionary. No, the appeal of *Black Knight* lies in its no holds barred savage 'Mech battles. The missions offer a good mix of stand-up fights, base assaults, and escort duty, with ample opportunity for employing a variety of weapons. No one configuration will work for every mission, so the MechLab is correspondingly more important. There's more logistical challenge, too, in that damaged 'Mechs can't be used for the next mission, and crippled chassis have to sit out two battles before they're ready to go again. It's actually possible to back yourself into a corner, with not enough 'Mechs to launch, but between the black market for bartering and replaying earlier missions, you can usually make a go of it.

If you liked *MechWarrior 4*, you will want this expansion, no question about it. It even adds new multiplayer games, featuring more refined team play and game balance tweaks, and multiplayer *MechWarrior 4* is truly enjoyable. Still, it could have been better, with fewer scripting errors, gotchas, and other assorted quirks. It's somewhere between the *Ghost Bear's Legacy* and *Mercenaries* expansions for *MechWarrior 2*—more than just a few new missions, less than a stand-alone game.

UPSIDE	Good combat, lots of missions, slightly more freeform than the original game
DOWNSIDE	Scripting errors, cheesy gotchas, high difficulty
RATING	★★★½

One on one against a tank on a snowy night.

Deadly Dozen

The Dirty Dozen, after a quick shower

RATING ★★

GENRE Tactical Shooter DEVELOPER n-Fusion [www.n-fusion.com] PUBLISHER Infogrames [www.infogrames.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 300, 64MB RAM MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Mature

Deadly Dozen, a budget priced tactical shooter, is reminiscent of those classic WWII buddy movies such as *Force 10 From Navarrone*, *The Devil's Brigade*, and *The Dirty Dozen*. You lead a motley crew of ne'er-do-wells and rapscallions in a variety of missions against the Axis powers stationed in Europe and Africa. Each man is rated in skills ranging from medical (med packs are more effective if used by this guy), to explosives, to small weapons. It's important to choose the right guys for each mission, and death is permanent, which gives the game more continuity than the threadbare story provides, and adds some difficulty to the end missions as your dozen dwindles.

The missions are huge and epic and mostly outdoors. You get to sneak your way into an alpine village, move through the desert to steal a B-52, rescue hostages, assassinate an SS officer... all worthy goals, and the missions feature memorable moments, surprises, and adrenaline pumping firefights. But the game is crippled by two problems. For one, the graphics engine just isn't up to the task. Clipping errors abound, the animation quality is generally poor, and you'll see weird things like floating dogs or soldiers firing their machine gun from two feet away. Hills and buildings are drawn right in front of you, and there's an omnipresent fog that not only looks cheesy (especially in the desert missions) but also limits the usefulness of your binoculars and sniper rifle. The game's graphical performance is spotty on some computers in spite of the two hefty patches that have already been released. The other problem is the generally poor AI. Your own men follow your orders well enough, but enemies have preternatural aim and awareness and enemy tanks will only target the character that you are controlling.

The flaws in the solo game stand out all the more, because the game also lacks any sort of multiplayer modes. Sure it's a budget title, but you still get a bit less than you paid for. —*Andrew S. Bub*

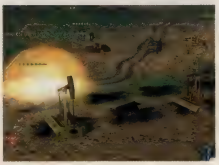
Got you in my sights... >>> Caught in a grenade ambush.

World War III: Black Gold

Bullets fly when the oil runs dry

RATING ★★★★

GENRE Real-Time Strategy DEVELOPER Reality Pump Studios [www.realitypump.com] PUBLISHER JoWood Productions [www.jowood.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium 300, 32MB RAM, 3D Accelerator MULTIPLAYER 2-8 players; Internet, LAN, Modem ESRB Teen



Vivid visuals abound.

With all the *StarCraft* and *Age of Empires* wannabes clogging store shelves, it's rewarding to find a real-time strategy game that does its own thing and does it pretty well. *World War III: Black Gold* imagines a near future where Iraq tries to cut off Middle Eastern oil. They, the United States, and Russia promptly head to war. Created by some of the folks who developed *Earth 2150*, *World War III* isn't wildly ambitious, but solid gameplay and colorful visuals make it a welcome addition to the real-time strategy fold.

You'll probably notice the slick presentation first and foremost. You'll fight with attractive (if rather small) 3D units on 3D battlefields, and the camera is intuitive and

Refineries and tank rounds don't mix. >>> A cargo plane airlifts in a new unit at night.

easily controlled. Little details abound: mobile artillery cannons elevate, base generators belch smoke, tanks kick up dust, and headlights shine into the darkness as night falls. With the exception of lame unit voiceovers, the audio is also strong—particularly the dark, brooding musical score.

World War III offers generally engaging gameplay to match the fine visuals and audio. You'll get three factions with units such as Apache helicopters and T-72 tanks, challenging campaigns, full-featured skirmish and multiplayer modes, and decent AI. The interface offers loads of configurable hotkeys and welcome options like the ability to group units while they're still in the production queue.

Massive unit buildups can be really tedious, but varied tactical possibilities keep the game interesting. You can send units out under the cover of darkness for some nasty sneak attacks. You can partially cripple an enemy's defenses if you destroy their base generators before launching a full-scale assault. Helicopter-borne commandos can capture vehicles whose crews have been eliminated with chemical weapons.

World War III: Black Gold won't exactly set the genre alight, but it's a good, solid real-time game with varied missions and good looks. —*Scott Osborne*

Rogue Spear: Black Thorn

Been there: done that: let's move on to get more than a weekend's entertainment out of the campaign.

RATING ★★½☆☆

GENRE Action–Strategy PUBLISHER Ubi Soft [www.ubisoft.com] DEVELOPER Red Storm Entertainment [www.redstorm.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 266, 64MB RAM ESRB Everyone

There comes a time in the life of every gaming franchise where enough is enough. *Rogue Spear* has reached that point with *Black Thorn*, the latest standalone expansion pack in the series. Dated technology, the simultaneous arrival of a true sequel in *Ghost Recon*, and a diminutive amount of new content makes this a retread suitable only for hardcore Tom Clancy completists.

That said, *Black Thorn* is more bland than bad. The story recounted in the nine new single-player missions revolves around a mysterious group of mercenaries reenacting terrorist strikes from recent history. It's a cute—if rather obvious—mechanism to let players tackle infamous atrocities in the context of a campaign. If you ever dreamed of stopping the hijackers of the Achille Lauro, this is the add-on for you. Unfortunately, Red Storm's design team didn't take full advantage of this concept, focusing on mostly obscure events, and many of the missions seem to have been rushed. There is usually little need for tactical planning, since the maps are straightforward enough to permit seat-of-your-pants operations. Don't expect

A little more invention was shown in other areas. There are ten weapons, including a futuristic P90 SMG, which seems to have already developed something of a cult following. The six new multiplayer maps could become online standards. Lone Wolf, a mode of play introduced as a single-player option in last year's *Urban Ops* expansion, debuts in multiplayer form here. This version of tag with guns is a great addition to the existing suite of online modes of play.

Everything else can be found exactly where Red Storm left it in 1999. Nothing about the visuals, sound, or enemy AI has been improved. Aside from the maps (and many of them are somewhat rough), little effort was expended here. In a nutshell, *Black Thorn* is exactly what a pessimist would expect of an expansion for a two-year-old game. —*Brett Todd*

Enjoy a relaxing cruise...after you disarm two bombs. >>> Hard to believe that this could induce a yawn, but...

Let's see. $5K to drive over a mountain or to win a race? You decide.

4x4 EVO 2

Lunar physics and rubber cars means no fun in the mud

RATING ★★

GENRE SUV Racing DEVELOPER Terminal Reality [www.terminalreality.com] PUBLISHER GodGames [www.godgames.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium III 450, 128MB RAM, 3D accelerator MULTIPLAYER 2-6 players; Internet ESRB Everyone

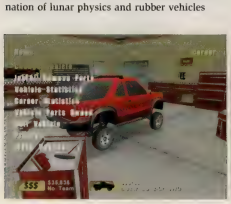
If judged solely by quantity as opposed to quality, *4x4 Evo 2* is one of the year's best racing games. There are literally hundreds of cars and dozens of tracks, tons of upgrades to purchase, a career mode… it's a lot of stuff, that's for sure.

But games aren't judged solely by their features—there's that little execution part to contend with, and here that proves seriously lacking. Mostly there's the unwelcome combination of lunar physics and rubber vehicles that make you bounce across the tracks and from AI car to AI car. It plays a bit like a mobile pinball game. Technically, it's probably not accurate to call it AI since the cars just follow a few lines on each track, whether you're in that spot or not. And the collision detection is spotty, making single-player races almost look like multiplayer ones, with cars warping around.

The racing is at best mediocre and at worst awful, so it's a good thing they included missions you can complete for cash. While they're a terrific idea (more variety is a very good thing), they're also completely brain dead—you get tons of money as a reward for being able to read two maps and drive from point A to B. Since there's no damage modeling in any part of the game, there's exactly zero challenge. Discover a downed plane! Wow, you need to drive over a hill! What a challenge! If you want to make it easy to unlock cool cars, here's a thought—make the racing easier, or just give the cars to the player up front.

As with the original, the multiplayer is actually solid, it's really quite attractive, and there's all that… stuff… in it, but this is really more of a downgrade from a rather mediocre original game than a "take it to the next level" sequel. —*Steve Bauman*

GENRE Air Racing DEVELOPER Victory Simulations [www.xtremeairracing.com] PUBLISHER Victory Simulations [www.xtremeair-racing.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium III 450, 128MB RAM, 3D Accelerator MULTIPLAYER 2-8 Players; Internet, LAN ESRB Not Rated



This is officially the dorkiest looking truck ever. >>> Gravity isn't your enemy.

Xtreme Air Racing

The skies are unlimited

RATING ★★★★½

Xtreme Air Racing was tossed around from company to company, appearing in "coming soon" lists from Sierra, Papyrus, and SSI at various points. Developer Victory Simulations stuck it out in the tough sim market and finished the game on its own, selling it direct via its web site. It's good that they did.

Like all good racing sims, there's a replay mode.

Xtreme Air Racing recreates the air races held each year in Reno, Nevada. Souped-up World War II-era fighters fly laps around pylons, the pilots balancing their attention between flying a tight course, avoiding other aircraft, and getting the maximum performance from their engines without burning anything out. Airshow favorite Bob Hoover optionally coaches you in plane management and flying technique.

Races start in the air, so novices can jump in without having to worry about learning how to take off and form up. This isn't NASCAR, though—get too close behind a competitor and you'll be buffeted by prop wake. Racing is actually pretty easy with visual guides such as neon track outlines, air hoops, and pylon lasers turned on. Disable

Prop wake can make overtaking opponents a real challenge.

these virtual "training wheels" and it becomes a real challenge. It would be unrealistic but really fun if you could unload the guns in a race as well, but alas the air combat mode is a traditional head-to-head dogfight.

You can tune your plane by changing engines, prop size, wing length, and fuel/coolant loads. This really comes into play when you leave Reno and head to fantasy courses such as the Alps or the arctic; altitude and temperature differences affect aircraft performance.

A manual would be nice; for now you're stuck reading the extensive PDF docs on the web site. Even so, this is a challenging, entertaining, and original experience that will appeal to flight and racing fans alike. *—Denny Arkin*

Supercar Street Challenge

The Bride of Frankencars

RATING ★★★½☆

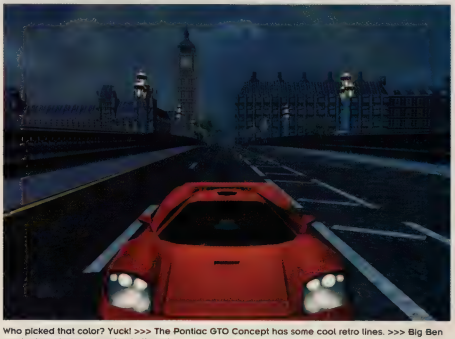
GENRE Racing DEVELOPER Exakt Entertainment [www.exaktent.com] PUBLISHER Activision [www.activision.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 350, 64MB RAM, 16MB 3D Accelerator. MULTIPLAYER 2 Players; same machine (split screen) ESRB Everyone

Don't let the ads fool you into thinking *Supercar Street Challenge* is a heady car design and driving simulation—it's arcade racing from top to bottom. Even though the Steve Saleen Styling Studio is a disappointment, there's enough entertaining racing to make a few nights fly by.

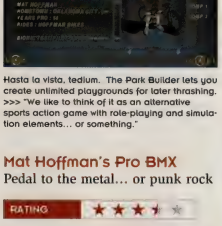
This is a console port in every sense of the phrase. You save to a "memory card" and open up new parts, tracks and cars by winning races. It's easy to define your auto's appearance by molding pre-set pieces you've earned. You then assign brakes, speed, acceleration and handling. The car is completely defined by these four statistics. So while your car may look like a slow bruiser, statistically it could be a flashy, nimble sports model, which makes the design side of the game feel rather pointless. You only get to race your car designs in one set of races and use manufacturer designs in all the others, as if the developers knew that these limitations would annoy you.

There are plenty of circuits cut out of seven detailed cities. Lots of straight track highlights the game's incredible sense of speed. With insane arcade handling, it's a blast to swing into a tight turn at the edge of grip and just survive. You can zip over sidewalks, smash through trashcans, and even plow through poles—there is no damage modeling. When combined with the excellent control, you can take in the gorgeous sights without fear. The AI does an admirable job racing in close proximity to you and enhances the game considerably, though catch up logic ensures you always have a race on your hands.

If there were a lot of games like this on the PC, it would be harder to enjoy. But it's nice to have an arcade racing bone tossed this way once in awhile. *—David J. Long*



Who picked that color? Yuck! >>> The Pontiac GTO Concept has some cool retro lines. >>> Big Ben overlooks outrageous racing in the rain.



Hasta la vista, tedium. The Park Builder lets you create untimited playgrounds for later thrashing. >>> "We like to think of it as an alternative sports action game with role-playing and simulation elements... or something."

Mat Hoffman's Pro BMX

Pedal to the metal... or punk rock

RATING ★★★½☆

GENRE Xtreme Sports **DEVELOPER** LTI Gray Matter **PUBLISHER** Activision [www.activision.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium 266, 64MB RAM, 3D Accelerator **MULTIPLAYER** 2 players; LAN **ESRB** Everyone

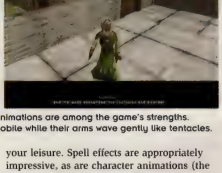
Generally, console ports don't find a welcome home on the PC. *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 2* proved that it was possible to break boundaries, however. While *Mat Hoffman's Pro BMX*, the two-wheeled pseudo-sequel, isn't quite as compelling as its predecessor, its candy floss consistency is a tasty treat. Try to appreciate the kitsch value. After playing, you can honestly tell Mom that she proudly birthed a biker.

Thrash "xtreme" courses for vehicle upgrades—that's your mission. Completing challenges like knocking out lights or achieving certain score levels nets magazine covers, which in turn open new venues and enhancements. It's a simple carrot and stick system really, but one that works exceptionally well. Boosting attribute scores or snagging new hardware will have physically challenged poseurs sifting through Career Mode long after instant action runs lose their magic.

Do yourself a favor: avoid the keyboard. Though the game performs well under most configurations, using the keyboard to pull off Fakies and Rocket Queens is a real chore. It's hard enough to avoid landing on your nards during combos without having to clumsily slap multiple buttons like a drunk contortionist. Biker heaven has a name, and it is "gamepad." No matter how you slice it, the title lacks the graceful rhythm of a certain skateboard sim, probably because BMX roadsters were made for stop n' go antics. It comes with the territory.

Fluid animations and death-defying stunts adequately disguise the game's sparsely populated environments. You'll be way too busy ogling backflips or bone-breaking crashes to complain about the boring venues. Even if you are that grumpy, at least no one will hear the bitching over a magnificent alternapunk soundtrack.

Depth isn't the game's strong suit. *Mat Hoffman's Pro BMX* is breezy, lightweight entertainment at best. As a quick coffee break-style diversion, the product succeeds well enough. Just avoid the Tony Hawk comparisons—this offering doesn't live up to the grand standards set by its mentor. Then again, what does? —*Scott Steinberg*



Spells—such as this meteor storm—and character animations are among the game's strengths. >>> When characters speak, their faces remain immobile while their arms wave gently like tentacles.

Magic & Mayhem: Art of Magic

Art it is not, though it possesseth some magic

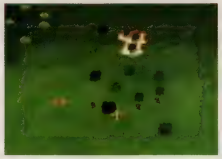
RATING ★★★☆☆

GENRE Strategic Role-playing **DEVELOPER** Climax [www.climax.co.uk] **PUBLISHER** Bethesda Softworks, Inc. [www.bethsoft.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium II 300, 64MB RAM, 3D Accelerator **MULTIPLAYER** 2-8 players; Internet, LAN **ESRB** Teen

Art of Magic, the sequel to *Magic & Mayhem*, is a strategy role-playing hybrid that tells the story of a young man (brave, naive) who seeks to rescue his sister (buxom, plucky) from the clutches of a wizard (deep-voiced, ruthless) with the aid of female companions (courageous, 38-24-26). The plot isn't thick enough to block candlelight, and the cut scenes that litter each mission are somewhat problematic. Characters join in conversations from one hundred yards away, intervening walls and rooftops sometimes obscure your view of the action. Other conversations commence mid-battle—all the assorted combatants simply freeze in place while the main characters chat.

Thankfully, the strategic elements are far more engaging. A typical mission (defeat the goblin king, steal the giant's keys) begins with spell preparation, during which you tinker with combinations of magic items and talismans to create the optimal blend of spells for the task that lies ahead. Casting these spells uses mana, which regenerates proportionally based on the number of Places of Power that you control. The majority of missions pit you against rival wizards who dispatch their minions to these mana hotspots (you do the same). It's an interesting strategic mini-game that is complemented by helpful unit AI, a smart interface, and a pause feature that allows issue commands at your leisure. Spell effects are appropriately impressive, as are character animations (the moving and fighting animations, specifically—the simplistic conversation arm-waving is less engaging).

It's not the prettiest game in the world, and some of the visual design choices are disappointing. Rather than making the tree and rooftops transparent, the game engine only allows you to toggle them on and off. The resulting clear-cut is like a scene straight out of *The Lorax*, but it's not particularly attractive. At its strategic heart, however, *Art of Magic* is a fairly entertaining blend of role-playing and tactical maneuvering, and that makes it worth a look—especially if you enjoyed the original game. —*Dave Perkins*



Issue unit orders through convenient pop-up menus or keyboard shortcuts. >>> An MLRS strike rains down.

Remote Assault

Out-Clancying Red Storm

RATING ★★★☆☆

GENRE Wargame DEVELOPER One Games [www.onegames.com] PUBLISHER Shrapnel Games [www.shrapnelgames.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium 233, 32MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2 players; Internet, LAN, modem, direct serial ESRB Not Rated

A few years back, Tom Clancy's company Red Storm Entertainment released a game called *Force 21*, a supposedly realistic, tactical-scale, real-time "wargame" that was neither realistic nor fun. Zoom ahead to today, and meet little ol' *Remote Assault*, a similar real-time "wargame" from developer Brian Gantt (the one of One Games) and publisher Shrapnel Games. It's funny how, even with its flaws, this game from a stalwart little crew can out-Clancy Red Storm's flop.

The game is set in 2063 during a second Civil War, this time with the South fighting to keep the secessionist North in the Union—a convenient fictional reason that gives both sides identical units. Labeled a wargame, purists may quibble; like *Force 21* it has many of the abstractions in scale and unit capabilities that we'd expect from a real-time strategy game. An important aside: yes Virginia, it does have a pause-for-orders function, and it's much appreciated. Unlike the Red Storm game, though, it really does seem to accurately (if somewhat abstractly) depict the interrelationships between modern weapons, and it does a *wonderful* job displaying (again, somewhat abstractly) the workings of small unit tactics. To top it all off, the AI is very, very impressive; at normal difficulty the AI—which usually has a slight advantage in numbers—will often kick you all around the map if you use normal real-time strategy tactics.

There are some issues, though. The worst is the lack of an in-mission save feature—a frustrating omission that can lead to tiresome repetition. In this case it's somewhat ameliorated by the fact that missions seem to max out at around 25 minutes. Still, the game does lock up from time to time, and when it does you have to restart your current mission from square one. Mission length is both a blessing and a curse; it's a blessing because it's nice to have a game you can have fun with without investing huge chunks of time in, but it's a curse because longevity becomes an issue (a promised editor could help here).

The problems are a shame, because they tend to overshadow what is really a very good game. If One Games and Shrapnel address them this would turn into a must buy game for most strategy wargamers; even with the problems anyone interested in learning the basic concepts of small unit tactics (or in meeting a worthy AI) will still want to pick it up. —*Scott Udell*

The Sting

Stealing stuff for fun and profit

RATING ★★★☆☆

GENRE Strategy DEVELOPER Neo [www.neo.at] PUBLISHER JoWood [www.jowood.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 300, 32MB RAM MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Teen

There's nothing like a game about a recidivist criminal. Take *The Sting*, which centers around one Matt Tucker, a thief just out of prison who immediately wants to get back into the fray of burglary. Criminal activities aren't a new concept for games, but JoWood has managed to create something that is refreshingly original, even if the mechanics feel somewhat clumsy.

The game places Matt within the confines of the sizable town of Fortune Hills. Shacked up in a cheap dive, your goal is pull off the ultimate heist, but before you can do that you have to retrain Matt by hitting smaller joints—a gas station, a food factory, museum, bank, stores, houses and the like. Along the way, you'll meet a plethora of other characters, and can recruit other criminals to help him carry out jobs. You can even choose a getaway car (there are fifty different sorts throughout) for a quick escape.

There are about twenty places that Matt can burgle, most of which are quite large and filled with various security systems and guards to overcome and avoid. You play the game from a 3D isometric viewpoint, which allows you to see both Matt and his surroundings. The graphics have a charming, cartoonish quality. What makes *The Sting* distinctive, however, is how all the game play is in the planning rather than in the actual heisting.

When you decide to take an establishment, Matt goes to his room to create a plan. First you choose his cohorts and a getaway car, then the scene switches to the location of the crime, where you use a VCR like recording interface to record the plan step by step. Essentially what you do is walk Matt and his buddies through the building in a pseudo real-time manner in order to avoid all traps in a mock run. When you think you've recorded the perfect plan, press play and put it into action. If the job was planned right, the crime is successful. Otherwise, it's back to the drawing board. Unfortunately you'll find yourself going back to the drawing board too often—the planning interface is finicky and quite difficult to get the hang of, especially if you make a mistake and just want to rewind and replay a single section.

Just the same, this is a fresh and different approach to what could have been a totally unremarkable game. While not for everyone, *The Sting* offers entertaining and strategically larcenous gameplay with a fun sense of humor. —*Jason D'Aprile*

Matt scopes out Fortune Hills looking for his next heist. >>> Matt stealthily avoids the owner as he sneaks around grabbing the loot.

Splash one bogey. >>> (Inset) Special effects have been enhanced, but the sim still looks dated.

F/A-18 Precision Strike Fighter

That odd sense of having blown up these targets before

RATING ★★½

GENRE Re-skinned Flight Simulator
DEVELOPER Graphsim Entertainment (www.graphsim.com) PUBLISHER Xicat Interactive (www.xicat.com) REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 233, 64MB RAM, OpenGL or Glide-capable 3D Accelerator, impaired long-term memory MULTIPLAYER 2-4 Players; Internet, LAN, Modem ESRB Everyone

Entering the cockpit of *F/A-18 Precision Strike Fighter* elicits a sense of *déjà vu*, especially if you played this game the first time it was released... as F/A-18 Korea. You read that right. The. Exact. Same. Game. Nearly five years ago.

To its credit, publisher Xicat does devote about a half-inch of space near the bottom of the back of the box mentioning that the simulation "is an enhanced version of F/A-18 Korea." The enhancements are about what you'd expect in a patch. The Glide-based graphics engine has had OpenGL support added, allowing the game to run in a post-3Dfx world. The textures have been updated and enhanced, giving the imagery a cleaner look. But the low polygon counts of the aircraft and terrain give away the game's true age. On the bright side, if you're still chugging along on an overclocked Celeron 400 system, here's a sim that will give you a decent frame rate.

The only other change from the original is the inclusion of a bunch of user-created campaigns and missions, created with the built-in mission editor. Many of these rival the original scripted campaign, but a few seem to come from high schoolers with a penchant for cutting English class.

That said, F/A-18 Korea was a good game in its day, and while not as deep or as detailed as Jane's F/A-18 or F/A-18E Super Hornet, it's still an entertaining sim. The systems modeling is rather simple, but the capabilities and appearance are realistic enough. If you're more into shooting than radar tweaking, you won't mind. The flight model, while good in 1997, feels more basic today. You can customize your weapon load, and there's even a tactical nuke that goes off with a stem-less, polygonal mushroom whimper.

F/A-18 Precision Strike Fighter is not a bad game, but it's also not a new game, and Xicat should not be charging $45 for this "classic." If it cost $25 or so and was called Hornet Korea Gold, we'd applaud this update of an entertaining sim from days past. At full price, you'll want to wait for it join its progenitor in the bargain bins. —*Denny Atkin*

Jekyll & Hyde

A Cubist Looks at London

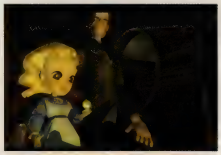
RATING ★½

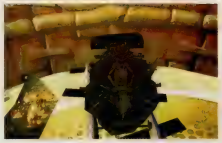
GENRE Action/Adventure DEVELOPER In Utero (www.in-utero.com) PUBLISHER Dreamcatcher Interactive (www.dreamcatcherinteractive.com) REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 400, 64MB RAM MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Teen

This game posits that Dr. Jekyll's daughter is kidnapped years after the original tale and he embarks upon a complex quest to save her. Much of what the journey requires is beyond human endurance, so he reactivates Mr. Hyde. Armed with only a walking stick and a serious left hook, you (playing as both Jekyll and Hyde) must retrieve artifacts from locations that include the seamier side of London, a Bavarian castle, and The Underworld.

Jekyll & Hyde has a keyboard interface that requires coordination and tenacity to execute the required mix of "run, jump, find, and use." The scenery is detailed and unique, with objects of interest indicated by sparkling lights. The characters are a mix of bizarre faces and body types that would put Picasso to shame. The voice acting is tolerable, with subtitles for those who would rather read than listen.

Like its namesake, however, the game turns beastly when you least expect it. The camera angle swings wildly, and it is not unusual to finish a difficult segment only to find Jekyll/Hyde under attack and outside of your view. Although you have keys to control the camera angle, they are often disabled when most needed. It is also not unusual to find yourself back at the



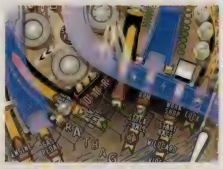


The object of your affections. >>> Yet another obstacle on the way to your daughter.

Windows desktop, without warning.

You can save your game at any time. The game restores to a designated checkpoint, however (usually at the beginning of the level), and not at the point at which you saved. Combine this design decision with the fact that health potions are as rare as a nun in a brothel, and you may soon find yourself considering the game CD's potential as a Frisbee.

Jekyll & Hyde quickly becomes an exercise in tedium. The complexity of the environment, coupled with the health management problem, means that there is little room for mistakes or exploration. As a result, you are apt to play the same segments over and over, ad nauseam. Perhaps a more appropriate title might have been *Groundhog Day II*. —*Cindy Kyser-Morgan*



Yipes... is that a sales brochure or a pinball table?

Dirt Track Racing Pinball

"But it sounded like such a good idea at the time..."

RATING ★★☆☆☆

GENRE Dirt Track Pinball DEVELOPER Ratbag Games [www.ratbaggames.com] PUBLISHER Infogrames [www.infogrames.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium 266, 32MB RAM MULTIPLAYER Hotseat only ESRB Everyone

When in doubt, milk your franchises. It hardly seems real, but that's precisely what Infogrames has done with value-priced oddity *Dirt Track Racing Pinball*. Only a joint effort between monster French publisher Infogrames and goofy Australians (co-developers Ratbag and Wildfire Studios) could produce such a freak show, introducing the ill-fated marriage of redneck sports with traditional coin-op gaming. No, seriously.

From such humble (okay, bizarre) beginnings comes a passable but wholly unassuming title that all but collectors can surely do without. That goes double for *Balls of Steel* fans; anyone who played GT Interactive's classic or Take 2's pseudo-sequel *KISS Pinball* is literally treading old, if freshly repainted, ground. Here you get two simple tables christened after the titular award winning driving simulations and designed for form over function.

Adequately stocked with ramps, drop targets, kickbacks, and minor gimmicks, these tables nonetheless pack less horsepower than an antique unicycle. Brilliant moments such as multi-ball perspective shifts are undermined by drab dot-panel animations, a drought of audio-visual perks and inane mini-games. For every time the ball kicks up dust while on the track or invokes a flashing light frenzy, there's a "match the checkered flag" video mode puzzle that wouldn't stump a 6-year old.

This sophomoric shenanigan doesn't suffer a total blowout, however. Gameplay is fast and fluid. Detailed 2D table graphics are fresh and colorful, despite an aging software engine. Load times have been minimized. The game is well balanced, with even a Novice option provided for beginners who lose balls like an amateur golfer. Assuming that it's absorbed in short bursts, the action just barely qualifies as entertaining... glaring deficiencies aside.

Knowing that such a dimwitted attempt at cashing in on consumers' goodwill could have blown up in more spectacular fashion, you can't help but respect the designers' moxie. If you are seeking cheap, limited entertainment, don't be ashamed to give it a try, but if you're interested in automotive novelties, well... stick with the real *Dirt Track Racing*. —*Scott Steinberg*

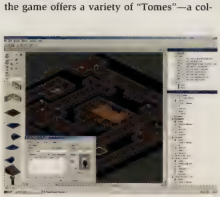
Runesword II

It's like a donut left on the front porch—it was good before the bugs got it

RATING ★★½☆☆

GENRE Role-playing DEVELOPER CrossCut Games [www.runesword.com] PUBLISHER Shrapnel Games [www.shrapnelgames.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium 166, 32MB RAM MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Not Rated

Runesword II gives old school role-players a chance for a little nostalgia. Retro graphics, retro gameplay, and a strong pen and paper feel are what this game is all about. Instead of giving you one main story to play through, the game offers a variety of "Tomes"—a collection of stand-alone quests to challenge your adventuring party. Each allows a different sized party, typically a group of four or five characters. To create a character you choose a race, which determines your statistics and available skills, and then distribute skill points to the chosen abilities. Most characters will have three to six abilities from a selection of nearly 40. This means that you can create many very different characters, but it also limits your race selection if there is a particular set of skills you wish to gain.



Viewing the Cave of Wonders in The Land Beyond tome in the Creator.

Battling a few powerful monsters. >>> Your initial points in creation determine which skills you know, and you can improve them as you level up.

The most interesting feature is the detailed Creator utility, which allows you to do essentially whatever you wish to the game. New Tomes are already popping up on the Internet, so you can expect a continuously growing library of content to draw upon. Of course, that would be a lot more compelling if the game actually worked.

CrossCut Games needs to find a good exterminator, because *Runesword II* is infested with bugs. Swarms of them. Reviewed on multiple systems, it felt like an untested product. The further into the game, the worse it got. Two full-length Tomes and four short Tomes are included with the game. One of the short tomes is impossible to complete.

Minus the bugs, *Runesword II* would be a worthwhile investment for anyone interested in taking a trip down role-playing memory lane. For now, unless it is thoroughly patched, you're better off saving your $40. —*David Ryan Hunt*

THE GRITTY REALITY OF WAR IS IN YOUR SIGHTS

0600 Parachute behind enemy lines, take out radar

0800 Command squad in beachhead assault

1000 Fly Cobra attack helicopter to soften up enemy positions

1300 Drive civilian vehicle through checkpoint

1500 Pilot and command a platoon of M1A1 tanks to take enemy stronghold

1800 Go covert with sniper rifle to assassinate enemy commander

Go to war in the most realistic combat experience ever, engaging in single-player and squad-based, non-linear campaigns.

Operate over 30 authentic military and civilian vehicles, plus aircraft in immense 3-D environments totaling 100 square km.

Create and share missions with the built-in Mission Editor and wage war online in multiplayer action via LAN or Internet.

"...so gripping, it could be a contender for Game of the Year."

4.5 / 5

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

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GENIUS AT PLAY

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Out of the Box

the fan is dead

Long live the fan

Read no farther unless you want to develop newfound respect for Jar Jar Binks. Okay, perhaps "respect" is too strong a word. But I have to say that George Lucas' floppy-eared Step-n-Fetchit abomination has grown on me of late. The reason? *Star Wars Episode I.I: The Phantom Edit*. I managed to get a look at this fan reworking of the biggest disappointment of 1999 last week, and it's given me greater appreciation for the character—or at least for what he represented to the phantom editor. Granted, what Jar Jar represented was mostly revulsion, but out of that distaste came something positive. The re-cut film is much better than the original, in large part due to the reduction of Jar Jar's role and the replacement of his offensive faux patois with a dense alien language. Subtitles nicely eliminate the slapstick "humor" and there's nary a fart joke to be found.

The new and improved Jar Jar Binks is emblematic of something more than a *Star Wars* film that doesn't induce nausea. The now-agreeable creature shows that there is no longer any distance between creator and fan, in any field of artistic endeavor. What George Lucas crafted with a gazillion dollars worth of special effects equipment can be ripped apart and reassembled by any average Joe with any average Joe's computer system. Of course, such modifications have long been possible with computer games. Anyone reading this column won't express much surprise over the phantom editor's accomplishments. Still, this remains a significant achievement since it clues the mainstream world into what's going on. Someone who isn't even aware of the existence of *Quake III Arena*, let alone the latest deathmatch mods that can be downloaded for it, can readily appreciate what the existence of *The Phantom Edit* means to the entertainment industry.

Computer game mods will probably continue to chug along as they have over the past four years or so, with one exception—tightened corporate policies regarding copyrighted materials. This could develop into a serious issue in the near future. It is very possible that the eager promotion of modding will change into caution, in the same way that George Lucas' personal appreciation of *The Phantom Edit* turned into curt dismissals from faceless legal functionaries once it became apparent that the re-edit was a phenomenon of sorts [it was also being sold, which was perhaps of greater concern –ed]. It doesn't take the imagination required to create Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker to picture a certain wavy-haired director pacing the floor with concern over the edit's impact on sales of the real *The Phantom Menace* on DVD.

This attitude toward any unauthorized use of intellectual property can have a cooling effect. Game companies may soon parrot their cousins at Fox and Paramount and start discouraging homebrewed addons and modifications. Instead of looking at such fan efforts as positive developments that enhance their games, corporate heads might begin to see them as threats. Still, there's no way to get around the power that's been granted to the audience. Corporations will likely withdraw their support of homemade alterations to their products in the near future, though that certainly won't be enough to curtail a movement that will forever alter the pop culture landscape. That's good news for anyone with a streak of creativity...and those whose services will almost certainly be needed next spring after *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones* opens in theatres. ●

Getting More From...

The Loneliness of the Long Distance Coder

An updated Marathon lets you run circles around other shooters

One of the great "lost" titles in computer gaming history is receiving a facelift. Bungie Software's Marathon paved the way for the likes of Half-Life and No One Lives Forever back in 1994, introducing the neophyte first-person shooter audience to a real plot and logic puzzles that involved more than killing a dozen demons for a gold key. The game was largely forgotten in subsequent years because of its Macintosh origins and the tidal wave of id Software's DOOM and Quake series. The programmers that make up Team Unpfhorgiven (yeah, that's really how they spell it) wants to remedy this oversight with Marathon: Resurrection, a total conversion of Unreal Tournament that remakes the original Marathon with flashy new 3D models. All the twists and turns of the solo storyline are present, along with the numerous pioneering multiplayer modes (made even better thanks to Unreal Tournament's brilliant bot AI). Marathon: Resurrection is still some time from completion, though you can get a look at the work in progress by downloading a beta from the official website. It features three single-player levels and nine multiplayer maps for LAN and net play. Additional information about the original Marathon games, which are must-plays for anyone interested in classic shooters, can be found at Marathon Central or at Bungie.org, a repository of information about all of the development house's games.

Fehr Itself

Add everything but a lockout to High Heat 2002

Money-minded baseball fans were disappointed a few months back when the link I provided for a Free Agent Utility for *High Heat Major League Baseball 2002* website came up dead. Well, I've done some digging and now have good news and bad news to report. The bad news is that I can't find that program anywhere else on the web. The good news is that an alternative is now available. GmsimFinance offers a complete financial system, with three-on-three trades, arbitration, the ability to sign your own players, a free agent draft, penalties and rewards for financial health, and cash distribution at the start of each season. The catch? You're going to have to pony up $7 in real-world currency via PayPal to download the program.

Boldly Go Where Deep Space Nine Has Gone Before

Give Startopia's space station a new look

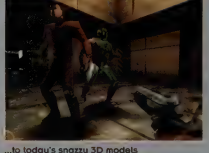
Startopia Post is the hub of choice for fans of Mucky Foot's real-time simulation of life on a space station. You can now fully customize the underrated game thanks to user-designed alien skins and missions. Once you've wrapped up the main campaign and grown tired of standard sandbox play, you can dress up your extraterrestrials in funky new outfits and take on fresh assignments such as dishing out fries for Galactic Zodburgers or building the sleaziest station possible with nothing but bars, love nests, and casinos. Great secondary sites that Startopia Post links to include Startopia-Skins, Startopia Missions, and a bizarre but intriguing page dedicated to monitoring Maa'golas the Grey (just like the, um, "real" Greys are supposedly watching and probing us right now).

Diablo Redux

Bring Nox up to date with hacks and mods

It didn't sell very well when it was first released in January of 2000, but *Diablo* wannabe *Nox* developed a cult following that went beyond the cash register. People are still playing the game today for its solo campaigns and numerous multiplayer features, which hold together well despite a lack of innovation. Nox-Hacks.com is the best online repository for *Nox* files. It contains over a dozen different trainers, lots of character skins, and even solo maps that have been converted to support multiplayer gaming, letting you play cooperatively. ●

From Marathon's sprites...



...to today's snazzy 3D models in Marathon: Resurrection.

LINKAGE

BUNGIE.ORG:
www.bungie.org
HIGH HEAT MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL 2002 GMSIM FINANCE HOME PAGE:
www3.sympatico.ca/komaro/Gmsimf.html
MAA'GOLAS THE GREY:
www.maagolasthegrey.50megs.com
MARATHON CENTRAL:
www.marathon.org
MARATHON RESURRECTION OFFICIAL WEBSITE:
resurrection.bungie.org
NOX-HACKS:
com: www.nox-hacks.com
STAR WARS EPISODE I.I:
THE PHANTOM EDIT PAGE:
members.onecenter.com/hollywood/phantomedit
STARTOPIA POST:
www.strategyplanet.com/startopia
STARTOPIA-SKINS:
www.mmccc.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/startopia.htm

BARGAIN BIN

Gabriel Knight III: Blood of the Sacred, Blood of the Damned

For as little as $11.99, you can join up with special sleuth Gabriel Knight on his last investigation. Just be sure to look online for a walkthrough before starting to play—some of the puzzles feature less than logical solutions. [Sierra/1999]

Hostile Waters: Antaeus Rising

One of the best games of 2001 that nobody played is now retailing for less than $10. Hostile Waters: Antaeus Rising might not have lit up the sales charts, but that shouldn't scare you away from this great blend of real-time strategy and action. [Interplay/2001]

Imperium Galactica II: Alliances

Less than $7 is all you need in your wallet to buy Imperium Galactica II: Alliances, one of the current standard-bearers in the space empire genre. You won't find a more intriguing story in a 4X game. [GT Interactive/2000]

Nox

A Diablo clone with something extra, Nox was more than worth the full purchase price when it was released two years ago. It's now a must-buy for the budget conscious at a list price of around $5. [See the opposite page for info on Nox mods.] [Electronic Arts/2000]

Unreal

Nearly four years after its release, Unreal still looks great. And it's a bargain at under $10 in either a solo package or a gold version that includes the Return to Na Pali expansion pack. If you've got a few more bucks, consider the $24.99 Totally Unreal compilation, which adds Unreal Tournament to the original duo. [GT Interactive/1998]

< INTEL versus AMD >
THE ULTIMATE SHOOTOUT, SEE PAGE 64
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Explores the Uncharted Territory of PC Gaming
Plus! Pool of Radiance, Red Faction, Monopoly Tycoon, NHL 2002, Shattered Galaxy, Windows XP Sound Blaster Audigy, & more

We're still not getting the old flood of letters, coherent or otherwise, and ed is getting antsy. What's the matter? Are we no longer interesting, or are we so dialed-in to everyone's idea of a perfect game magazine that there's literally nothing to say? Anyway, the reaction to our cover was one of puzzlement. "What are those things the dude on the cover is holding?" asked Andy. "Are they nipple warmers from another galaxy?" Igor Obraztsov (and let's just get it out of the way that Igor is a fun name to say out loud) was also concerned about the lack of, well, depth to the barrels of the guns. "You know, staring down a gun barrel is like peeking into a tunnel to afterlife," he says, shifting into full-blown *Max Payne* mode. "The black void pupil is like a cave where hides the beast, like a gateway into the unknown." No, we don't know, but our resident *Farscape* expert does point out that the guns are laser pulse weapons, or something like that, so perhaps the technology is such that there's no actual barrel anymore and… ah, never mind.

Love that XP

In response to Benjamin Kuhner's letter bashing Microsoft, [CGM 133] let me tell you, I've been gaming/Interneting/ programming since 1988, and Windows XP is the best thing I've seen come down the pipe in years. Microsoft does use some questionable tactics (hence the settlement between them and the DOJ), but they have finally hit the nail on the head.

XP is a real upgrade, it changes the fundamental structure of the OS to a much more stable platform. As for not being able to use any software bought before 1995, how many cars bought before 1995 are still in good shape? There's a real crime.

So all-in-all, Benjamin is completely off base in this instance. I have previously bashed Microsoft for their policy of charging full price for "bug fixes," but they have one hell of a product in XP.

Durel Hauser
EET, CMPET

XP Yawn

Yawn. I still haven't read a review that has a compelling reason to move from Windows 2000 Pro (service pack 2) to XP. Yours [CGM 133] provided even less incentive. Product Activation more than stinks, it's an atrocious idea and one I won't subscribe to.

It's about time Microsoft offered a stable OS to the general public, though. Now they just need to refund everyone who purchased Win 3.x through Win 9x, or give away XP for free.

David Shor

Jason Cross responds: Though Windows XP offers some nice features like a better interface, better compatibility with old programs, and much easier networking, for users that are happy with Windows 2000 there's no real need to upgrade.

Activating complaint

Why is everyone complaining about WindowsXP product activation? I have upgraded to XP and to activate all I had to do was enter the product key number which is no different than when you register any other software. They did not ask for my name or any other personal information, though I did have to promise them my first born.

It is one awesome OS.

Tony Ewing

Why complain? Because they're Microsoft, and everything they do is evil. We're in the pocket of Microsoft, yeah right… remember, they're EVIL! –ed, Slashdot reader

We rule

First off, you guys rule and I hope your trend of excellence continues. Now on to my point. I like Macintosh for games because there's not a whole ton of them.

Sounds crazy? Well it's not. I like having to wait for games to come out later for Macintosh, as I can check up on them and make sure there not bad. Also having to translate games to Macintosh acts as a filter for keeping out most of the crappy games. Companies want to gain money not lose it. Also that way I won't go out and buy every game out there, as I would if I owned a PC. And finally, Macs are more reliable and cooler looking. Thanks and your magazine rules!

Laurie Dolan

Not sure if I'll go with you on reliability, but they do look cool. Except for those iMacs in j.crew colors. Ugh. But I want a G4 case for my PC. Oh wait, I'm supposed to bash Mac owners, kind of like AOL users. Um, get a real computer! Yeah! –ed

We really rule

First off, I would like to say that I love computer gaming with a passion. Being 15 years old can kind of make that passion hard to follow (with school and the constant fear of being taken into the bathroom by the high-school bully and getting to know, first hand, what being somebody's bitch is all about.)

This is why I keep it mostly to my self whenever anybody asks me what my hobbies are. I would love to be able to tell them I play computer games all the time, but it

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Why in the world would someone spend years turning Quake into a racing game? A look at who makes 'em and why they make 'em, and why mods are the future of gaming.

Plus: $1000 Gaming PCs, more reviews, the usual drill.

becomes a matter of either me being forever expunged from all things social or keep to my self and maybe keep what little reputation I have left.

Anyway, with that out of the way I will continue. Your magazine is really one of a kind with its awesome editorials and how obviously geared toward adults it is. Other magazines seem more geared toward a younger audience, yet you seem forever faithful to the more "grown-up" fans. This is very commendable in my opinion. Sure it would be nice to see more "child friendly" articles, but I find that it is nice to, every once in a while curl up with your magazine and take a more adult view on what is happening in the gaming industry.

Keep up the good work, and I will still be subscribing to your magazine for some time to come, get lazy and discontinue you editorial genius, and I will cut off my subscription forever. Good luck!

Heidi Feltman

We rock

I'm just writing to say that you guys rock. I don't think I'll ever let my subscription slip. Not only is your magazine great, and accurate, but your web site is sweet too.

P.S. Could you put this letter in the magazine? Thx.

Mitch Hess

Shameless flattery like that will get you everywhere, my friend. –ed

Three finger Chick

Tom Chick's Three Finger Salute was excellent ["Lest We Forget," CGM 133]. As a hard-core gamer who started out with the IBM PC, Jr. (yes, I really had one!), I could really relate to the difficulties involved in getting a game up and running.

One comment I would like to add was the change that occurred when modems became available and you were actually able to download a patch by phone. It seemed like magic. Of course, the bitter irony was that what began as a convenience turned into a mechanism by which buggy software could now be released with impunity, since patches could always be added later.

Thanks for the trip down memory lane and keep up the great work.

Joe Imperato, MD, FACR

Majestically dumb review

Maybe It's just me, but I think Tom Chick has been sniffing his Jolt Cola bubbles again. His *Majestic* review was not only way off base, but he gives away some off the game? What's up with that?

First of all, you don't pay $10.00 a month right from the get-go. You get like six episodes, if you buy the game. Something he fails to point out. I have been playing for three weeks and have not completed the second episode.

I would also like to point out the fact that many of the people that play *Majestic*, or any who do, have the option of making a website for the game. He never mentions any of the "kewl" websites that have been made *by* the players. Or the fact it does show some realism about hackers.

I guess he just wasn't impressed by WHOIS, and with that letting him down, he just whipped through the game missing the fan based (some are outstanding pieces of work) websites. Not to mention the sideplaying done with Solitare1947.

What's fun for me? Realism. In any game. *Majestic* attempts this by combining real CIA documents of the past (like the LSD experiments), with real events, and real websites, with the flirt of today's conspiracies, and "OMG", you just might learn something. Something Tom fails to tell you.

My review on *Majestic*: At least 3 stars.
My review of Tom Chick? 2 stars.
Upside: He has a brain.
Downside: Just wish he would use it.

Dennis Mace

My review of this letter: 2.5 stars. Upside: Makes decent points, good use of humor. Downside: Used "kewl" in a sentence. –ed

Fast Athlons

Recently, I bought the new Athlon instead of a Pentium. Well, I was glad to read your article "David and Goliath" in the December issue of your magazine. It's wonderful to know that the Athlon 1.53Ghz card beats out the Pentium 4.2Ghz. I heard the Athlons were good, but not *that* good.

Well, thanks for the informative article, it did help to ensure me that I made the right choice. Keep up the good work!

David Fehling

Memo to self: It's much better to print that as 2GHz Pentium 4. Another memo to self: Check charts more closely. Final memo to self: Get milk on the way home. –ed ●

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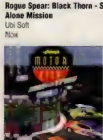

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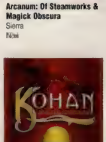

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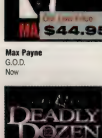

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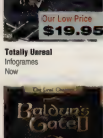

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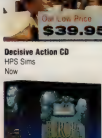

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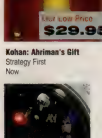

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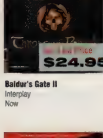

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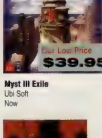

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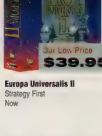

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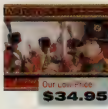

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road to nowhere

the really little guys

Capital vs. talent in independent game companies

CMP Media LLC's Gama Network provides the greatest pool of resources to game developers today. It is the umbrella under which falls the development website Gamasutra.com, Game Developer Magazine, the annual Game Developer's Conference, the International Game Developers Association, the Game Developer's Choice Awards, and the Independent Games Festival. The latter entity is devoted to the recognition of independent talent from around the world and provides a resource for "the little guys," giving them a leg up on making contacts with publishers. In 2001, almost all of the Festival's six awards went to Nexon for its intricate and complex online-only tactical space strategy game *Shattered Galaxy*. Now Nexon is technically independent as far as "the rules" go, but it's a company with far more resources than most of its "Indie" compatriots.

I'd love to see a component of this Festival called the "Spit and Bubble Gum Contingent" that would showcase Indie companies under a strict budget cap. This would give credence to folks like Lonnie Flickinger, the allegedly sole employee of Chiselbrain Software, which is submitting for this year's competition a first person shooter called *Pencil Whipped*. Now this is a 3D game that looks as though it is created entirely of pencil sketches—probably because, well, it is. By today's standards, it is inane, kludgy, and completely incompetent, but has that eerie, ugly, brilliant quality that we often attribute to the great cult classics.

"I'd love to see a component of this Festival called the "Spit and Bubble Gum Contingent" that would showcase Indie companies under a strict budget cap."

And speaking of cult classics, a grass-roots category might also help out Octopus Motor's Lars Norpchen and his sidekick-chick Sparky. Their Festival entry is *They Came From Hollywood*, a real-time strategy-action game that is based on the, um, cult classic films of Harold Haxton. The game features Terrifying Creatures over 200 pixels tall, and you get to play a giant B-movie monster and eat people, cars, and other mostly edible (like pork rinds) landmarks in some of the country's biggest cities. You can choose to be The Martian Mothership from the 1953 classic *Mars needs Chicken!* and its 1954 sequel *Mars needs Gravy!*, Thorax the Giant Mantis from 1959's *The Mantis from Atlantis*, or the title characters from 1958's *52 Foot Woman*, 1969's *Neutrino the Atomic Newt*, and 1960's *The Gob from Uranus* (for which they really apologize) to name just a few.

Yes, Haxton's "movies" are now cult classics, and Octopus Motor's affiliate website www.phobe.com says this about him: "One of the greatest B-movie directors that never lived, Harold Haxton's twenty years of 'killer B's' are an inspiration to all misunderstood artists, late bloomers, and those people who always open the milk carton from the wrong side."

And speaking of milk… I was privileged to actually get a final copy of a genre-defying gem named *Bad Milk*. Brothers Mick and Ted Skolnick are the artsy and techie (respectively) cornerstones of DreamingMedia LLC, which despite its dairy adventure, cannot decide whether or not to call itself a game company. Mick is a Yalie MFA grad, and Ted is a programmer who formerly plied his trade at a large financial website. After leaving his now ex-wife, Ted ended up sleeping on Mick's floor for a while, giving them plenty of time to brainstorm the nightmare that is *Bad Milk*. "We kinda produced it in our living rooms with one Macintosh, one PC, one laptop, and a video camera, and that's about it." Now they live down the hall from one another and are pursuing various interests in the world of video installation art and "virtual sculpture."

The opening to this game had many in this office chuckling for days. I won't spoil it entirely (you really should download the demo at www.dreamingmedia.com), but it has to do with raisin toast, and the morning paper, and some "seriously outdated milk." Inspired by Bill Viola's installation art, Monty Python, and Coney Island's haunted house, the game has you solving a series of puzzles contained in bizarre video scenes that are floating in blackness, and involve, among other things, a drowning man, a creeping man, and a few really ingenious blind mazes with nothing but audio clues to guide you: Bump to the left… <Lethargic voice> "Can't go there, it's a wall." Crash to the right… <Lethargic voice> "Can't go there. It's a wall." Step straight, break glass, trudge through mud, up and down elevators, through a cocktail party and eventually emerge to see the face of [surprise ending withheld].

With no budget whatsoever, this game manages to capture the imagination, and really make you laugh, in an "all your base are belong to us" kinda way. It'll be interesting to see if any of these whimsical titles make the Festival's final cut, and if slick production values like last year's Nexon game carry a lot of weight, they may not. But pencil-sketch shooters, B-movie monsters, and Mick and Ted's excellent adventure might at least stand a chance among a We Spent Almost Nothing field of contestants. It's a shame there isn't one. ●

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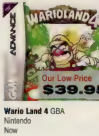

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PHIL STEINMEYER

INSIDE the sausage factory

hand-off

Passing the Tropico torch

An expansion pack for our game *Tropico* will gold master next week. *Tropico: Paradise Island* will feature new buildings, new scenarios, new music, and many other goodies, but the best new element (for me), is the new developer, Breakaway Games.

PopTop spent about two years making *Tropico*, and the end of the project featured a rather nasty 11-week stretch in which I worked every single day (Saturdays, Sundays, etc.) without a day off, at about 80 hours a week. As with most prior games I've been involved with, at the end of the project, I was proud of the game, but I felt like I never wanted to look at it again.

So when our parent company asked for an expansion pack, I knew I wanted it done outside of PopTop. We signed up Breakaway Games, who had impressed us with their *Cleopatra* expansion for the game *Pharaoh*.

> "Perhaps most importantly, it's probably a better product than we would have developed here at PopTop. Fresh eyes and open minds are a good thing for game design."

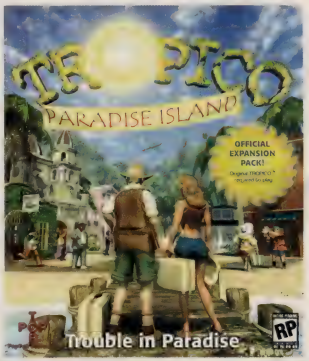
Using Breakaway allowed us to keep our internal team focused on our next big two-year game, but it also meant that the team working on the expansion pack would be fresh and excited about the game, rather than just spinning their wheels in their third year of working on the same concept. Plus, with a short development cycle for the expansion, it meant the outside team would be the ones killing themselves to get it out the door, while I could spend my fall weekends watching football and debating the merits of Fritos versus Doritos as couch-potato nourishment.

The expansion pack was originally targeted to gold master on November 7, and be in stores around November 20, just in time for Christmas. The development was so short that there were only three milestones, alpha, beta, and final version. The alpha, though it looked good, was delivered a week late, and the beta was two weeks late—not a good trend. Surprisingly, though, development accelerated to the point where it looked like the gold master would be delivered on time, with only a couple of minor feature cuts. Breakaway was in full crunch mode, and I was regularly receiving e-mails from their producer at 10:30 at night and throughout the weekends.

Then, about two weeks before the gold master date, Take-Two shifted the release date back two months, into January. The rationale seemed valid—with the short development cycle, their sales and marketing forces didn't have enough time to properly prepare for the game and launch it well. Launching an expansion pack in the heat of Christmas season without sales and marketing support would likely get a cold shoulder from retailers and perhaps consumers. Still, I think it was initially a disappointment to everyone who had worked extra hard to meet the original date.

However, within a couple days, everyone had adjusted to the new dates and excitement had picked up. Though the release date was now two months later, the gold master date was pushed back only two weeks—everyone wanted to get the game done and "in the can." The extra two weeks allowed the full original feature set (plus a couple optional items) to be implemented, and it allowed extra time for scenario polish and general testing. In the end, the expansion included some things we would have liked to have included in the original game (random events, most buildings are now rotateable, and there are many more scenarios, with more detailed scripting), some overall balance tweaks (faster construction, more powerful tools for hard-line dictators, and better information about elections), and more content (many new scenarios, an extra hour of music, a dozen new buildings, some new characters, edicts, etc.)

Perhaps most importantly, it's probably a better product than we would have developed here at PopTop. Fresh eyes and open minds are a good thing for game design. PopTop might return to the *Tropico* universe in the future, but only after enough time has elapsed that we can approach it with more enthusiasm. And it'll be at least a year or so until our internal game hits crunch mode. I'll be loading up on Doritos in the meantime.... ●



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TOM CHICK

THREE finger salute

console envy

I'm glad I don't have one

In a 1976 interview with *Playboy* magazine, Jimmy Carter confessed that he had lust in his heart. *Playboy* doesn't come around asking me questions, so I'll just tell you guys that I have a similar confession to make. I was watching this game on the Xbox called *Dead or Alive 3*, which features the most realistic breasts in any game ever, and I got a cardinal sin in my heart: envy. PC games don't have breast graphics like that.

I can only say "graphics don't matter" so many times before it starts to sound as hollow as it is. When I say it while everyone's gawking at *Dead or Alive 3*, they don't really listen to me. Sometimes they won't even let me have a turn. I don't really care about the actual game, which involves pounding on a bunch of buttons until you either win or lose. It's like Whack-A-Mole without the mole. But suddenly *Max Payne* doesn't have as much spectator cachet as it used to. Time was I could show my brother-in-law *Max Payne* and I would be Big Man at the Family Dinner. Now I don't stand a chance when my nephew has some statuesque blonde named Tina bouncing around on a 32" screen.

> "I can only say "graphics don't matter" so many times before it starts to sound as hollow as it is. When I say it while everyone's gawking at Dead or Alive 3, they don't really listen to me."

My nephew calls it '*DOA*'. "Ha!" I snort, "That stands for 'dead on arrival'."

No one's listening to me. They're all watching the reflections, the trees, the sky, and the swirling snow. Except everyone who's male and over thirteen. We're all watching Tina's breasts jiggle.

"Yeah, but can you play in bullet time, like *Max Payne*?" I ask.

No one's still listening to me. And it's not just because *The Matrix* is so 1999. It's because PC games are the redheaded stepchildren of the holiday releases. I got a PC because I was sick of going to the computer store and seeing two games for my Apple IIGS, both of which I already had, and twelve games for the IBM PC, all of which looked really nifty. Now I feel the way board gamers must have felt ten years ago. They'd be looking for someone to play *Cosmic Encounter* or *Squad Leader* while the rest of us were installing speech packs for *Wing Commander*.

Since I play a lot of computer games, my friends' kids used to think I was pretty cool. It's not really working any more.

"What level are you in *Diablo*?" they ask. I'm not really playing *Diablo* anymore, so I lie and tell them 117. Then I explain that I have *Civilization III*. "My culture rating is really high. I just researched replaceable parts and now I have to find some rubber. I have Adam Smith's Trading Company in Nottingham. How about that?"

"In *Grand Theft Auto 3*, I stole a police car and ran over an old lady," a nine year old tells me, "It was cool." Children are so innocent. And they won't shut up about *Rogue Squadron II*.

I partly blame Bungie for marginalizing me. I was betrayed by *Halo*, which should be a PC game. Watching my friends play, I have to pretend I'm not impressed. And I'm not. Really. That whole shipwreck-on-an-alien-planet thing is right out of *Unreal*. And that squad AI stuff is right out of *Half-Life*. And those squealing gibbering goofy aliens are right out of *MDK*. And all those weapons and grenades and flashlights and dialogue and atmosphere are right out of *No One Lives Forever*. Who wants to sit on a big couch and play some hybrid of *Unreal*, *Half-Life*, *MDK*, and *No One Lives Forever*? I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make that sound so cool. I should point out that you can't use a mouse. Ha! I'm really glad I don't have an Xbox.

And let's talk about how these systems look. The Gamecube looks like a box of Kleenex. And the Xbox is like a VCR circa 1983. "Sheesh, look how big it is!" I said to the guy at the front of the line who got one when Best Buy opened, "Ha! Are you sure you have room for that thing?" Of course, I didn't mention that it's half the size of the smallest computer case I've ever seen. But man, am I glad I don't have to make room for one of those. I got there at 4AM and was number 58 in line, but they only got in 40 units. So, like, whew. I still have plenty of room next to my TV for other stuff. Like flower vases and pictures of my grandparents. Now I can spend the rest of the holidays replaying *Max Payne* and telling myself, and anyone else who isn't busy staring at Tina's breasts, how good it looks. I'm really glad I don't have one of those things. ●

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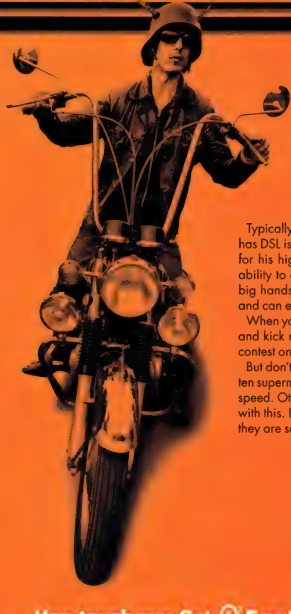

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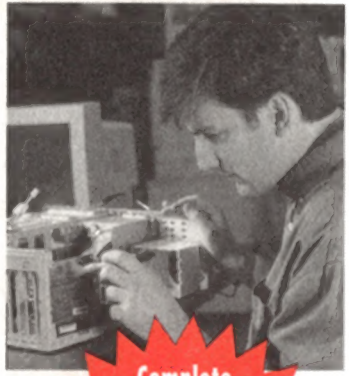

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